The State of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Evangelical Theology

After a long period of quiet, there is now considerable noise in evangelicalism regarding the Trinity. When I undertook doctoral work on contemporary trinitarian theology in the late 1990s, my bibliography was dominated by the usual suspects: Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, Pannenberg, von Balthasar, Jenson, Gunton, etc.[1] My (non-evangelical) advisor at a (non-evangelical) school knew that I identified myself as an evangelical Christian, and became concerned that I was not engaging in dialogue with any evangelical authors. I assured him that I was not ashamed of my heritage, and that I would gladly have interacted with evangelical authors, but that there simply were none who were doing significant work in this field. Indeed, the entire late twentieth-century renaissance of trinitarian theology took place without active participation from evangelical theologians.

There is still a dearth of significant evangelical books that offer worthwhile constructive treatments[2] of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is not possible, for example, for this paper to proceed by reporting on major monographs on the Trinity published in the last decade by established thinkers, because there are none.[3] However, percolating

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[1] I published a brief overview of the contributions of each of these thinkers in "Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:3 (Fall 2001), 175-182. A fuller treatment is forthcoming *in The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (NY: Peter Lang, 2005), which includes my own proposal for understanding the economic and immanent Trinity.

[2] Evangelicals still excel at writing accessible introductions and summaries. Among others, see Millard Erickson's *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

[3] Stanley Grenz's recent *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) is not an exception to this rule. In that work, Grenz operates as a theological journalist providing "a sketch of the renaissance of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century" (preface, *x*). It "forms a kind of prequel to the projected second volume in … *The Matrix of Christian Theology*," the series which began with *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) and will continue with three books on God, Christ, and the Spirit.

among the journal articles, book reviews, and controversial literature, there are several trends that bear closer examination, because they are indicators of how evangelicals are thinking about this doctrine, and they may exert pressure on eventual full-fledged formulations of evangelical trinitarianism. This paper offers a broad, journalistic survey of five factors affecting this field of doctrine: 1. the early high Christology movement; 2. recent questioning of eternal generation; 3. the gender relationships debate; 4. the explosive growth of philosophical theology; and 5. developments among anti-trinitarian groups. I have chosen to take up five disparate movements and treat each of them very briefly in one paper, because my goal is to survey a large territory by locating all five movements on the total map of trinitarian thought today. Each of these fields deserves closer scrutiny, preferably from specialists. My hope is that by showing them all at once at a generalist level, I can help those specialists get their orientation to where the real work needs to be done.

I intend this paper as a survey report on important trends rather than as a constructive argument of my own to be illustrated or applied in five areas. I attempt to be long on description and short on theological agenda. However, having as many axes to grind as anybody, I can offer in advance a modest thesis which did in fact lead me to select these five trends from among the many current developments.[4] It seems to me that we are living through a period in which the traditional ways of deriving the doctrine of the Trinity from Scripture are losing some of their persuasive power. The Triune God has not changed, nor has the Bible, nor has the essential Christian trinitarian doctrine of God. What has occurred over the course of the last few centuries, however, and with greater acceleration in recent decades, is that the platform of orthodox trinitarian theology has become more loosely connected to its ancient exegetical moorings. This situation, equal

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[4] Aside from these five, there are other important developments shaping evangelical trinitarianism which merit attention as well and certainly could have been included here. Among others, these six stand out: Increased evangelistic encounter and apologetic dialogue with Islam, especially the Sufi tradition with its high view of Christ, is helping to sharpen our understanding of Christian monotheism. Ongoing appreciation for ancient liturgical traditions (and the encounter with Eastern Orthodoxy in particular since mid-century) has been enriching. The way the doctrine is handled in the architectonic structure of full-scale systematic theologies by influential evangelical theologians is worth investigating. Covenant theologians are becoming more explicit and self-confident as a movement about how their characteristic ideas about God's eternal decrees inform their trinitarianism. Pentecostal experience of the Spirit continues to provoke theological reflection among evangelicals. Some observers note a turn towards more explicit reflection on the Trinity in evangelical practices of spiritual formation and of congregational worship. All of these deserve comment, but did not make the cut for the top five.

parts threat and opportunity, calls for a concerted response from the theological disciplines ranging from biblical studies through historical and philosophical theology, with contemporary systematic theology orchestrating the massive interdisciplinary effort. I will not argue this position at length in what follows, but it is a conviction that guided the selection of the five topics in this report, and I will return briefly to it in conclusion.

I. Early High Christology

The first movement that seems likely to shape evangelical trinitarian thought is actually a major development in the field of New Testament theology, in which the key players are not necessarily evangelical. In recent years there has been a revolution in what has been called "early high Christology." Several lines of research are converging to form a new approach to one of the oldest questions of Christian origins: how could devout Jewish monotheists like the apostolic generation give worship to the man Jesus Christ? What kind of monotheism is it that proclaims, as does Paul in I Corinthians 8:6, one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ?

This central question of Christian origins seeks to define the conditions necessary for worshiping Jesus Christ as the fully divine Son of God while continuing to uphold belief in one God. There has been much debate in recent years among scholars who disagree about whether the early Christian worship of Jesus Christ was the result of a general second-temple period lowering of standards regarding the exclusivity of monotheism (admitting various semi-divine mediator figures into Jewish thought), or the result of including Jesus in the narrative identity of the one God of Israel (the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, and then raised Jesus from the dead in such a way that this man belongs to the identity of God).

There have historically been two approaches to evaluating the status of monotheism in the second temple period, the formative period for NT thought.[5] The first is to consider it as strict, jealous, and vigilant monotheism bearing an OT character, which would find worshiping a man unthinkable. If this is true, many scholars argued, then the first

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[5] I am following Richard Bauckham's analysis in "Paul's Christology of Divine Identity," a paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in 2003, available online at http://www.sbl-site2.org/Congresses/AM/2003/Richard_Bauckham.pdf . I find it especially illuminating to consider the first option, the subordinationist and functionalist christologies of classic liberalism, as motivated by this same problematic now re-emerging in the current discussion.

Christians (as good monotheists) could not have worshiped Jesus or recognized him as divine. Therefore they underplayed any NT witness to Christ's deity, or at least constructed arguments to locate it at the end of a developmental process supposedly discernible in the layered strata of the NT documents. For example, critics argued that they could discern, with greater or lesser degrees of confidence, a low (divine man, miracle-worker) Christology in the earliest layers captured in Mark, progressing to a high (incarnational, pre-existence) Christology in later authors like John. The story of this developmental hypothesis is largely coterminous with the story of modern investigation into New Testament Christology from Reimarus on.

A revised account of second temple monotheism has emerged, however, in the work of later scholars, which finds in the literature of the period some evidence for a looser or more flexible monotheism. Researchers like Margaret Barker[6] and Larry Hurtado[7] have gathered evidence of belief in intermediaries between God and man during this period. First-century Jewish monotheism is complex, they argue, and "there is some indication that Jewish belief in the uniqueness of God was able to accommodate surprising kinds of reverence for and interest in other heavenly figures such as chief angels and exalted patriarchs as well as personified attributes or powers of God."[8] Recognition of the middle figures as semi-divine indicates a lowering of the bar of monotheism, and Hurtado has argued that this more flexible treatment of monotheism is what made it possible for those first Jewish disciples to even conceive of giving worship to Jesus Christ.

Most recently, a third way has emerged. Several scholars are arguing that the bar of monotheism was as high as possible in this period, and that the apparently insurmountable obstacle of recognizing a human person as divine was in fact surmounted by the first Christians when they were led to make the radical move of including Jesus Christ in the identity of God. Richard Bauckham[9] and N. T. Wright[10] have argued that

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[6] Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel, A Study of Israel's Second God* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).
[7] Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; reprinted by Edinburgh's T. & T. Clark, 1998). Hurtado has now released a 746-page work entitled *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Chrisianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
[8] Hurtado*, One God, One Lord*, 8.
[9] Richard Bauckham, God *Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1999).

the Old Testament looks forward to God showing up in person to carry out a series of actions which fulfill his covenant with Israel. The character God is expected to enact the foretold plot. Shockingly, Jesus comes on the scene and does all of those things. The only conclusion to be drawn is that Jesus is identical with God, and that he is to be included in the divine identity. Using sophisticated narrative analysis, this argument constructs a new path to a very high Christology. In some ways the Christology of divine identity will restore confidence in a doctrine undermined by critical scholarship (the deity of Christ), while in other ways it is worth asking if the new narrative arguments are adequate for upholding concepts like pre-existence.

This "early high Christology" is in the hands of the professionals in the guild of NT studies, who must decide methodologically how far-reaching its implications are. It seems to me that if this perspective is even partly right, however, it calls into question one of the central tenets of NT scholarship dating back to at least Reimarus: the developmental hypothesis according to which the earliest NT Christologies are low, the later high. Early high Christology argues that the earliest view, divine identity, is the highest possible view. Some have called this view "big bang Christology," pointing as it does to the insight that everything was there from the beginning. Developmental Christology was a fruitful research paradigm for some time, and yielded some insightful ways of reading the NT. A great range of positions were available within this basic approach: James D. G. Dunn attempted to embrace the developmental view wholeheartedly while still salvaging orthodox theological commitments.[11] Paula

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[10] N. T. Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998), 42-56. Available online at http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_JIG.pdf (note different pagination). Wright's first footnote indicates how this article develops themes from his larger works.

[11] James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (2nd edition, Eerdmans, 1996). The first volume of Dunn's collected essays, *The Christ and the Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1998), gathers ten shorter pieces from 1982-1997 in which Dunn reflects further on his method and results, interacting with critics. Especially relevant to this discussion are his Foreword to the second edition of *Christology in the Making* (reprinted here at 287-314), "Was Christianity a Monotheistic Faith from the Beginning?" (315-344), and (above all) "The Making of Christology: Evolution or Unfolding?" (388-404), in which he clearly distinguishes his position from the work of P. M. Casey, with its "rather onesided and reductivist development schema." Dunn has recently published the first volume of a projected 3-volume opus entitled *Christianity in the Making*. This volume, *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, 2003) is 992 pages. For a devastating critique of Dunn's project (as it relates to Pauline theology and trinitarianism especially), see Francis Watson, "The Triune Divine Identity: Reflections on Pauline God-Language, in Disagreement with J. D. G. Dunn," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000), 99-124. Typically scathing is this remark: "Why the abandonment of the

Fredriksen, on the other hand, marshaled her considerable erudition to make the old case that Jesus' followers promoted him to divine status some time between the writings of Mark and John, as a careful reader of the canonical Gospels and contemporaneous literature should supposedly be able to discern. The extreme end of the developmental hypothesis is captured well by books with a "from …to" structure in their titles: American public television picked up on Fredriksen's *From Jesus To Christ*[12] as a title for a documentary series, while P. M. Casey traced the movement *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God.*[13] Along with its insights, the developmental hypothesis yielded much nonsense and many false trails, especially in its *traditionsgeschichtliche* and *religionsgeschichtliche* forms. Early high Christology overturns a central assumption of the developmental approach, and will at least serve to relativize and chasten the earlier approach.

The implications of this movement for trinitarian theology should be evident: identity Christology in particular is filled with potential connections to properly trinitarian concerns, offering an alternative route, perhaps even a more direct one, from the New Testament's categories to the developed theological formulations of the Trinity.[14] What does the movement have to do with evangelicalism? It presents an opportunity which evangelical theologians should not miss: a narrowing of the gap between mainstream biblical scholarship and the strong doctrinal commitments to the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and above all to the story of God's saving work in the history of his people, centered in Jesus Christ. It also provides a new hermeneutical angle on the deity of Christ, a new argumentative basis for recognizing Jesus as the eternal Son of God. That new basis will be appreciated in proportion to the perceived instability of the

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classical Christian doctrine of God should be a precondition of Christian-Jewish dialogue, and what there would then be left to talk about, is not explained."

[12] Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus To Christ: The Origins Of The New Testament Images Of Christ*, Second Edition (Yale University Press, 2000). The PBS show *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians* originally aired in April 1998. See http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/

[13] P. M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991).

[14] For some examples of the fruitfulness of this approach, see Andy Johnson, "Ripples of the Resurrection in the Triune Life of God: Reading Luke 24 with Eschatological and Trinitarian Eyes," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002), 87-110, and "Resurrection, Ascension, and the Developing Portrait of the God of Israel in Acts," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57/2 (2004), 146-162. An appreciative critique of identity Christology can be found in C. Kavin Rowe, "Romans 10:13: What is the Name of the Lord?" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 22 (2000), 135-173.

older bases. Whenever a traditional argument for the Trinity needs to be abandoned, new arguments will be especially welcome. That brings us to the second point:

II. Rejection of Eternal Generation on Biblical Grounds

A second trend that merits examination is that some responsible evangelical theologians are rejecting the ancient doctrine of eternal generation, citing mainly biblical grounds for doing so. The doctrine of eternal generation is the teaching that within the eternal life of the immanent Trinity (God in himself, without reference to creation, redemption, or any outward work), God the Father is the source from which God the Son derives. That a "son" should come from a "father" is evident from the metaphors themselves (just as a "logos" should come from a speaker), and so speaking of the Son as "begotten" was natural for the early Christian tradition. The rise of Arianism, however, called for a conceptual defense of this simpler Biblical language: Arians argued on the one hand that if the Son was begotten of the Father, there must have been a time before he was begotten, and on the other hand that all things come from the Father, so the Son is not qualitatively different from creation for his being generated. In response, the formulators and defenders of Nicaea argued that the begetting of the Son was not temporal, but eternal: He was always begotten of the Father, and there was never a time when the Father was the Father without the Son. Further, they distinguished between the Son's being begotten by the Father and the world's being created by the Father through the Son. Just as "a man by craft builds a house, but by nature begets a son," reasoned Athanasius, God brings forth eternally a Son who has his own nature.[15]

Why would a contemporary theologian reject this ancient doctrine? The writers who are calling it into question cite four reasons: first of all, some of them believe that the idea of generation inherently tends toward subordination of the eternal Son to the Father.[16]

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[15] Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 2:29. For later witnesses, see John of Damascus' *De Fide Orthodoxa* I:8, and Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* I, question 42, article 2.

[16] "For although creedally affirmed, the doctrine of the generation of the Son (and the procession of the Spirit) is a relic of Logos Christology which finds virtually no warrant in the biblical text and introduces a subordination into the Godhead which anyone who affirms the full deity of Christ ought to find very troubling." J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 594. Unlike Moreland and Craig, many of the evangelical authors who argue that generation implies subordination advance their arguments in the context of the gender discussion. See below.

Secondly, they consider this notion of inner-divine fecundity to be abstractly speculative,[17] and perhaps bizarrely mythological.[18] Thirdly, and most decisively, they simply do not find it to be biblically supported.[19] The most articulate and accomplished of the theologians who have gone into print arguing against eternal generation is Robert L. Reymond, who adds the fourth reason: he finds in his Reformed tradition an alternative account of the trinitarian relations, one that defends the deity of Christ more powerfully. After arguing that "Scripture provides little to no clear warrant for the speculation that the Nicene Fathers made the bedrock for the distinguishing properties of the Father and the Son" (reason three), and that the fathers assert "he was begotten out of the being of the Father by a continuing act of begetting" (reason two), and that in saying this "they were, while not intending to do so, virtually denying to the Son the attribute of self-existence, an attribute essential to deity" (reason one), he goes on to argue that Calvin pointed to a better way (reason four).[20]

This is not the place to set forth a full refutation of Reymond's arguments, which have already drawn considerable fire from others.[21] Briefly, my view is that he is wrong on all four counts: (1) It is bizarre to accuse the Athanasian tradition of falling into

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[17] John M. Frame, who affirms eternal generation, would likely reject it if it claimed to be saying very much. However, he analyzes the doctrine and finds little additional conceptual content in it besides that "the Father is eternally Father and the Son is eternally Son." He is glad to have an alternate way of saying this, though he worries that "at least some of this discussion is playing with words." Frame thinks that Christ's temporal begetting may be an image providing "some hints as to his eternal nature," indicating why it was the Son who chose to become incarnate; and Frame even nods toward the notion that other relationships among the three persons might be revelatory of their eternal relations, beyond just their relations of origin. See *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 707-714.

[18] "The Son, however [they say], is begotten by the Father and that by an act of eternally continuing generation … through an eternal 'always continuing, never completed' act of begetting on the Father's part." Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 324. See also John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 488-92.

[19] I will not review here the arguments about "begotten" language in the New Testament. On the "only-begotten" (monogenes) controversy, see (against only-begotten) Richard N. Longenecker, "The One and Only Son," in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, ed. K.Barker (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1986), 119-26; and (for only-begotten), John V. Dahms, "The Johannine Use of Monogenes Reconsidered," *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983), 222-232.

[20] Reymond, 326.

[21] See Robert Letham's review of Reymond's *New Systematic Theology*, *Westminster Theological Journal* 62/2 (Fall 2000), 314-319; and Paul Owen's "Calvin and Catholic Trinitarianism: An Examination of Robert Reymond's Understanding of the Trinity and His Appeal to John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal* (2000), 262-281. Reymond has responded to critics in two articles at the Knox Seminary website: "Westminster Trinitarianism: Nicene or Reformed?" and "Revisiting How We Should Support the Doctrine of the Trinity." See www.knoxseminary.org/prospective/faculty/knoxpulpit

subordinationism --rather like blaming Luther for works righteousness or Wesley for cold formalism. The theology of begottenness defended by the Nicene party is identical with their strategy of upholding the full divinity of the Son, *homoousios* with his Father. (2) The charge that eternal generation is speculative is not a strong enough charge to count, unless Reymond were to clarify where the boundaries are that allow us to say anything whatsoever about the eternal being of God (for instance that God is triune in any way, or that he elects on the supralapsarian scheme, both of which Reymond wants to affirm); while the charge that eternal generation is a bizarre, mythological picture of an ongoing process is a badly-documented straw man. To skip to reason number (4), I think Reymond makes far too much of the supposedly distinctive Reformed view of the Trinity. His trail of footnotes includes several interesting witnesses, but the main tracks seem to lead back by way of Princeton to Geneva: Along with Charles Hodge, Reymond relies on B. B. Warfield's long and masterful essay on "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity,"[22] wherein Warfield teased out Calvin's strong commitment to the self-existence and *autotheos* character of the Son and Spirit.[23] Taken in their fuller context, Calvin and Warfield do not make the kind of strong case that Reymond finds in them. The Reformed tradition may in fact have a distinctive contribution to make to the doctrine of the Trinity, but it will take a more generous approach than Reymond's in order to bring out its peculiar profile. Calvin's genius in this area has more to do with his use of the doctrine of the Trinity to answer the question of how we distinguish knowledge of the true God from that of idols,[24] and in his consolidation of gospel soteriology around the doctrine of God's Triunity.[25]

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[22] B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), pp. 189-284. Because Warfield's constructive concerns run so near his historical concerns, this essay should be read alongside his "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956).

[23] The search for a uniquely Reformed version of trinitarianism may be related to the conflict with Arminianism. Early Arminians took issue with certain Reformed emphases in the doctrine of God (as well as, of course, the doctrine of election). Arminius himself (1560-1609) took the term *autotheos* to be "a dangerous expression" not supported by traditional usage, and argued that "the Divine Essence is communicated to the Son by the Father, and this properly and truly." He may also have tended toward a more social understanding of the persons of the Trinity, arguing that the three "are distinguished by a real distinction," and are not modes of being but rather "things with the mode of being." See *The Works of Arminius* Vol. II, "Certain Articles to Be Diligently Examined and Weighed," pages 707-708.

[24] To grasp the importance of this, it is necessary to attend not only to *Institutes* book I chapter 13 (the long chapter on the Trinity), but to see how that chapter is the culmination of an otherwise fragmentary treatise on the knowledge of God that runs from the first sentence to the end of the thirteenth chapter, including

However, having briefly indicated problems with those arguments, I should admit that the most interesting plank, and really the only ultimately significant plank of Reymond's case, is his charge that eternal generation is not biblically grounded. To his credit, Reymond is willing for his case to stand or fall on this basis alone. In response to a negative review, he pleads, "Should not our primary concern be to assure ourselves that our faith *first of all* passes biblical muster, employing the faith and creeds of the ancient fathers, while we revere their creedal labors, only as *secondary* aids and helps as we seek to learn and to enunciate the truth of the infallible Scriptures?" Reymond thinks so. "And I could wish that more Reformed theologians and pastors were less concerned to be 'creedally correct' and more concerned to be biblically governed in their Trinitarian beliefs and pronouncements."[26] I suspect that the real area of disagreement between Reymond and more traditional theologians is not in the field of patristic scholarship or Reformation studies. It lies instead in the question of what counts as unwarranted abstraction in the task of biblical interpretation.

To what extent is theology a collation and conjugation of scattered texts, and to what extent does the mandate of the theologian require him to seek a deeper penetration into the dynamics that generated the texts and the mentality that abides within them?[27] Reymond has an excellent section on the "revelational ground" of the doctrine of the Trinity, in which he reflects on "the historical nature of its revelation," agreeing with

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sections on natural knowledge of God, idolatry, Scripture, the limits of reason, and images in churches. Karl Barth was taking a lesson from Calvin when he announced that the doctrine of the Trinity must be used doctrinally as the answer to the question, "Who is God?"

[25] On the persistent rumor of a uniquely Protestant version of trinitarianism, see Christoph Schwöbel, "The Triune God of Grace: Trinitarian Thinking in the Theology of the Reformers," in *The Christian Understanding of God Today*, ed. James M. Byrne (Dublin: Columba Press, 1993), 49-64. Gerald Bray's suggestions are still promising. In his *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), he advocates Reformation trinitarianism as a radical "change of perception," "a vision of God which was fundamentally different from anything which had gone before, or which has appeared since." He laments "theologians' failure, or sheer inability, to perceive the uniqueness of what the Reformers taught about God," especially about the Trinity. See the five points he develops from pages 197-212. Philip Butin has explored Calvin's trinitarianism at length in his *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). By far the most careful historical investigation is that of Richard A. Muller in the fourth volume of his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), though Muller is unduly dismissive of more constructive arguments like Butin's.

[26] "Revisiting How We Should Support the Doctrine of the Trinity," at www.knoxseminary.org.

[27] See David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 87-100.

Warfield that "the revelation itself was made not in word but in deed… in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit."[28] However, when he treats the actual content of the doctrine of the Trinity, he has little to say after his (extensive and well argued) proofs of the deity of the Son and the Spirit.[29] Wherever propositions are available in Scripture, Reymond is on solid ground and speaks confidently. But when the time comes to evaluate a revelation of the Trinity "not in word but in deed," he becomes reticent. It may be true that the eternal Son has filial characteristics which are the transcendent ground of his actions in salvation history as the obedient one, the sent one, the one who became incarnate, but "the church must be extremely cautious in asserting what these distinguishing properties mean lest we go beyond Scripture."[30] The entire Christian tradition, following the guidance of the inspired apostles themselves, thought more boldly: theology has always taken the economic actions of the Son and Spirit to be somehow revelatory of the eternal being of God. This is what Reymond all but denies, and that leaves his treatment of the Trinity biblicistic in the narrow sense of being confined to verbal formulations.[31] Untethered speculation is one danger to be avoided in this field (and thanks are due to Reymond for underlining that), but the opposite error is a theological timidity that never rises to the level demanded for full faithfulness to the revelation. The doctrine of the Trinity is a large doctrine, and its formulation and defense have always required a certain ampleness of reflection on the revealed data. The way forward is to admit that, in Colin Gunton's words, "it must be acknowledged that there is some doubt as to whether Scripture supports the creedal confession directly or without great labour." For the justification of the Son's eternal generation, "prooftexting is not enough."[32]

Let me be clear, since I have singled out Reymond from among the other writers who share his views, that he is a worthwhile dialogue partner precisely because of the seriousness and sense of responsibility with which he takes up the theological task.

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[28] Reymond, 209; quoting Warfield, 33.

[29] Reymond is author of the valuable monograph *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990).

[30] Reymond, 341.

[31] Letham's review (see above) devotes great attention to Reymond's Trinity discussion and concludes, "This work is biblicistic and sectarian in its thrust."

[32] Colin Gunton, "And in One Lord Jesus Christ…Begotten Not Made," in his *Father, Son And Holy Spirit: Essays Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 63.

Reymond has the right theology of church tradition: it is to be valued and respected as a helpful guide and support, but it has no authority independent of Scripture. I can even admit to feeling a certain tug toward how encouraging it would be to take a stand on the Bible alone, even over against such worthies as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, etc. If a free theologian always reaches the same ancient conclusions about central doctrines, how is he to know that he is actually willing to forsake all and follow God's word alone? If ever there were an actual test of one's commitment to *sola scriptura*, it would be in a parting of the ways this drastic, of clinging to Scripture and rejecting the entire line of theological heroes from the second century down, leaving a sharp cut through the middle of all the ecumenical councils. But it is not necessary or even helpful, [33] for on the question of eternal generation, and on the overall methodological approach of seeing the economic Trinity as a true self-revelation of the immanently Triune God, the tradition is broadly right, and the Christian church has spoken with a unified voice across all the confessional lines.

III. Debates about Gender Relations

A third trend in evangelical trinitarian thought is the way the ongoing discussion about gender has shown a recurring tendency to become enmeshed in the doctrine of God, with mixed results. Observers of the debate know that evangelical complementarians and evangelical egalitarians have been vying with each other about the nature of the relationships between men and women in the family, the church, and society. For some time now, both sides have been appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity in various ways. One side argues that a certain relationship of either subordination or equality of woman to man should be maintained because of the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. The other side replies by accusing its opponent of intentionally constructing a doctrine of God for social reasons, projecting a particular view of inner-trinitarian relations simply in order to underwrite a particular view of male-female

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[33] John MacArthur of Grace Community Church recently issued a retraction on a similar issue. He had taught for some time that Christ's sonship was a role taken on at the incarnation, but which did not have any bearing on his eternal personhood in the immanent Trinity. In "Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ," (*Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6/1, Spring 2001, 21-23), MacArthur admits that he had not been taking full account of the depth of the revelation in a number of NT passages. He now recognizes that those texts do in fact teach more than merely "incarnational sonship," and embraces the idea which the tradition has long called "eternal generation," though he is still "not fond of the expression."

relations. The rhetoric in this discussion has tended to heat up pretty quickly. Without even considering the merits of either the egalitarian or complementarian cases, it is easy to draw the conclusion that many evangelical theologians have a tendency to use the biggest guns available when disagreeing with each other: this conversation has been filled with charges of heresy, idolatry, ideological projection, "hermeneutical bungee-jumping"[34] (whatever that may be), "tampering with the Trinity,"[35] and of trading Christian orthodoxy for "the split-level stratifications of a pagan pantheon."[36] One observer has pointed out that terms like these ought to be "reserved for sects that genuinely subvert biblical Christology such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons."[37]

As a matter of their intellectual biographies, scholars become interested in specific doctrines for a variety of reasons, and in itself it is not necessarily disturbing that interest in one controversial topic might lead to interest in the Trinity. Motivated by current questions, several authors have done solid work investigating the biblical evidence, or turning to the history of doctrine to investigate what was said theologically, before the rise of the current gender debate, about the relationship of Father to Son in the immanent Trinity.[38] However, the conversation has been dominated so far by those whose primary interest continues to be in the gender discussion, and who annex the doctrine of the Trinity in order to provide greater doctrinal or rhetorical leverage. An especially egregious case of this is the book-length argument published recently by the Australian Anglican theologian Kevin Giles. In *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*,[39] Giles attempts to solve the question of whether the eternal Son is subordinate to the Father, in order to secure his own egalitarian

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[34] Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 (March 1997), 57-68 (reprinted as an appendix to his *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as a Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

[35] Bruce A. Ware, "Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?" *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6/1 (Spring 2001), 4-12.

[36] Bilezikian, 66.

[37] Craig S. Keener, "Is Subordination Within the Trinity Really Heresy? A Study of John 5:18 in Context," *Trinity Journal* 20 (1999), 39-51.

[38] Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42/3 (September 1999), 461-476. John V. Dahms, "The Generation of the Son," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* 32/4 (December 1989); Dahms, "The Subordination of the Son," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:3 (September 1994). Bruce A. Ware has pursued his interest in this subject in a book-length study, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Crossway, 2005).

[39] Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

position and refute his opponents. Putting himself through a crash course on patristics,
Giles attempts to make the long tradition of doctrine answer questions he finds pressing
today. He finds them pressing today because, as his sub-title indicates, he has been
provoked by those contemporary evangelical theologians who teach that there is an
eternal relationship of subordination of the Son to the Father within the immanent Trinity,
and that that theological truth is the background of the complementarian view of gender
relations in church and family. Giles admits that he was first interested in defending his
account of gender egalitarianism, and that he then turned to the church fathers to read
through them in search of their view about the eternal relationship between Father and the
Son as the founding analogue of human gender egalitarianism.

Why does Giles turn to the theological tradition to solve this problem, and why does
he devote a book-length study to questions of tradition, consensus, and the limits of
orthodoxy? It is because he believes that the contemporary gender debate is parallel to
the debate which precipitated the council of Nicaea, a situation in which "quoting biblical
texts and giving one's interpretation of them cannot resolve complex theological disputes.
In the fourth century, this approach to 'doing' theology had to be abandoned, and I
believe this approach should also be abandoned today because it always leads to a
'textjam.'"[40] For a few pages, Giles employs some promising language about theological
interpretation of Scripture, and as he traces Athanasius' thoughts he is on the verge of
properly describing what occurred in the 4th century. Athanasius broke the textjam by
turning attention from isolated texts, each infinitely disputable in itself, and turned it
toward "the scope and character" of all scripture, the broad outlines of biblical revelation
as it encodes the mind of Christ in inspired text. From that holistic account of what has
been revealed, Athanasius revisited each disputed text and found the way through,
overturning objection after objection, and finally sealing the project by the audacious
move of introducing a novel term, nowhere found in scripture*: homoousios*. This extra-
biblical term served as the archimedian point which allowed the orthodox party at Nicaea
to specify what they meant by their reading of scripture. The Arians were forced to
linger in vagueness or refute the key interpretive term. This is true theological reading of

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[40] Giles, *Subordinationism*, 5.

scripture, and this is what the Athanasian party accomplished (not just in 325 but throughout the 4th century, climaxing in 381 at the council of Constantinople).

Unfortunately, Giles' project does not follow that of his model, Athanasius, but instead flattens out into something rather pedestrian. Giles goes on to argue that when textjams such as this occur, "tradition may be the deciding factor,"[41] and that since everybody wants to be on the side of historical orthodoxy, the question becomes: "On whose side is the tradition?"[42] Giles believes it is on his side, and thus turns to the history of doctrine to find what it says about subordination. "If some evangelicals want to hold that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father, I do not dispute that texts can be found to 'prove' this opinion. What I dispute is their claim to represent historic orthodoxy, the tradition handed down to the church of our day."[43]

It is perhaps obvious that I regard Giles' project as already seriously flawed because of these two motives: to use tradition as a tie-breaker in Bible fights, and to ask contemporary questions of the fathers. Still, the project could unearth interesting findings, as it culls historical data. It could, but it does not. The distorting influence of his motives compromises his ability to read the tradition well. Though Giles provides a typology of various kinds of subordination (from ontological to incarnational to functional to eternal role subordination), he routinely collapses them into each other and misreads the evidence. From Irenaeus to Athanasius to Augustine and Aquinas, on into Calvin and Barth, the hermeneutical discussion about the exegetical basis of Trinitarian theology is very sophisticated, and Giles is asking a very blunt question of it. As a result, Giles significantly misrepresents the diversity and nuance of the history of trinitarianism, blundering into the most difficult regions of trinitarianism: hypostatical distinctions, the relations of origin, the substance-person distinction, the threeness-oneness problem, the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, etc. Giles crosses all these boundaries, bluntly putting the question: "Is everybody here equal?"[44] As a result he misreads one author after another, taking them to mean the opposite of what they intend.

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[41] Giles, *Subordinationism*, 7.

[42] Giles, *Subordinationism*, 6.

[43] Giles, *Subordinationism*, 25.

[44] Note also Giles' argument with Andrew Moody, in which Giles routinely alleges that his opponent is guided by ideological motivations (the subjection of women), while for his part Giles believes himself to be doing ideology-free exegesis. http://www.ajmd.com.au/trinity/#L4

I should point out that the problem would have been just as acute and the results just as unhelpful if Giles were trying to prove the opposite point. Speaking from the point of view of the doctrine of the Trinity, the evangelical gender debate has not produced much by way of clarity. This book in particular is so bad that even its opposite wouldn't be true.[45]

In the hotly contested field of the theology of gender relations, evangelical theologians would be well advised to exercise great caution in the way they make their appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity. I am tempted to call for multilateral disarmament in this arms race, asking both sides to declare a temporary moratorium on invoking trinitarian warrant for their positions on gender relations. That, however, is unrealistic, because the fact is that Scripture itself does make use of analogies and appeals which cross over the line between trinitarian relations and human gender relations, and responsible theologians must account for this biblical witness (I Corinthians 11 is the most obvious crux). What is needed in this area is some sense of perspective and balance. Restraint is called for, at least until such time as the evangelical theological community can demonstrate that they have cultivated a real independent interest in the doctrine of the Trinity for its own sake. Until a theologian finds the Trinity worth investigating in its own right, he or she should have the good taste not to bring up the subject in order to round out an argument about theological anthropology.

IV. Explosive Growth of Philosophical Theology

The fourth trend worth watching is the way the doctrine of the Trinity is being handled in the fast-growing field of philosophical theology. A great deal of trinitarian theology is now being developed by Christian philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians, rather than by doctrinal or systematic theologians. What is the difference between these two creatures? Thomas V. Morris, himself a model of a philosopher who has done serious work in the field of philosophical theology, explained the situation as early as

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[45] A devastating critique of Giles can be found in Mark Baddeley, "The Trinity and Subordinationism: A Response to Kevin Giles," *Reformed Theological Review* 63:1 (April 2004), 29-42. Baddeley works hard at being fair and generous in his reading of Giles, but rejects his method in general, refutes his interpretations of most figures, disagrees with his conclusions, and laments the implications of the work.

1989 in an article called "Philosophers and Theologians at Odds."[46] Not only have Christian philosophers made major advances in the wide world of academic philosophy, but "philosophers have begun to show deep interest in the distinctive doctrines of the Christian faith, focusing their attention on such ideas as those of incarnation, trinity, atonement, sanctification, and the nature of sin." That same year, Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. pointed out that analytic philosophers were discovering "that specifically Christian doctrinal claims raise important philosophical questions about the nature of persons, the relationship between persons and essences, the attributes of God, and the concepts of punishment, retribution, and forgiveness." They go on to say that "By exploring these and other doctrinal themes (ones theologians have sometimes prematurely abandoned), philosophers have gained access to a host of fruitful philosophical issues."[47] In the 15 years since then, the trend these writers identified has continued. More and more Christian philosophers are turning their attention to central doctrinal matters, and these scholars are generating an extensive bibliography of works on classic theological themes. The journal *Philosophia Christi* was able to devote an entire theme issue to the doctrine of the Trinity, boasting of "the robust revival of philosophical theology" and celebrating the fact that "bright minds are making progress on the most difficult issues."[48]

Philosophers and theologians belong to different disciplines, often appeal to different criteria, and sometimes seem to be speaking different scholarly languages even when there are many overlapping elements of vocabulary. For this reason, it is difficult to be certain when a real disagreement is occurring, and when the two parties are talking past each other. Herein lies the current problem, because as philosophers turn to doctrines, as Morris observes, "an immediate result of this is that we are quickly attaining a new level of conceptual clarity concerning the content and credibility of these doctrines."[49] To an outside observer, the rigor and speed of analytic philosophical discourse is astonishing. A scholar may publish an article on a fine distinction within a particular subject, and

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[46] Thomas V. Morris, "Philosophers and Theologians at Odds," *Asbury Theological Journal* 44/2 (1989), 31-41.

[47] "Introduction," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 2.

[48] Craig J. Hazen, "Editor's Introduction" to theme issue on the Trinity, 371. *Philosophia Christi* 5/2 (2003).

[49] Morris, "Philosophers and Theologians," 31.

realistically expect to see responses published in other journals within a few months. Ambiguity of any kind is not tolerated, which partly explains why these philosophers of religion brush aside most contemporary theology with the damning judgment: unintelligible. When this scholarly community turns its attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, the topic of their first and greatest interest is the reconciliation of the three and the one. Among theologians, this "threeness/oneness problem"[50] is considered to be one minor issue among many more important issues on the doctrinal, hermeneutical, historical, and spiritual fronts. The philosophers can't imagine why we haven't tidied this up long ago, and frankly they wonder what it is we have been working on all this time.

A further example of how the Trinity is handled by the two communities is the current discussion of social trinitarianism. The social analogy for the Trinity has for many centuries been one of the two major alternatives available for describing the Trinity. It has been more popular in the Christian east (stemming from the work of the Cappadocians in the 5th century) and in certain minority strands of Western thought (Richard of St. Victor, for instance, is popularly cited as a social trinitarian). The other major analogy has been the psychological analogy, wherein the Trinity is likened to an eternal mind (the Father) which has total self-knowledge (the Son or Logos) and total self-love (the Spirit or Wisdom). The psychological analogy has held the field in the West, primarily owing to its brilliant elaboration by Augustine and its extension by Aquinas. Generally, these two analogies have functioned in a subordinate place in theological method. The salvation-historical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity has been either presupposed or established by argumentation, so that the Father's economic sending of the Son to be incarnate and the Spirit to indwell is properly recognized as the true basis of the doctrine of God's triunity. When the further question arises of how these three can be one, then the analogies come into play: the three are one either as a community is one (the social analogy), or as a soul is one (the psychological analogy).[51]

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[50] The name given to it by Cornelius Plantinga, "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (April 1988), 37-53.

[51] See Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21-47.

In the world of philosophical theology, the social analogy for the Trinity has been promoted to a full-scale conceptual model, with the elements of the argument defined with the characteristic clarity of anglo-American analytic philosophical theology. Persons are now said to be individual centers of consciousness, each containing a set of faculties and standing in certain relations to each other, forming a society (a social Trinity) of three members. This three-member community is no longer an analogy for how to understand some logical implications of trinitarianism, but is now transposed into an actual model of what the Trinity is. The Trinity simply is an actual society of three persons. These personal characteristics and the interpersonal relationships are derived from consideration of logical possibilities within certain givens of Christian revelation. A standard way of deriving a trinitarian conceptuality is to posit one being in three persons and then indicate the extremes to be avoided: polytheism on one end and unitary modalism on the other. What is generally omitted from these philosophical considerations is the host of concerns which generated the original propositions in the first place: the logic by which Jesus Christ was confessed to be divine, and the revision in the existing concept of God necessitated by that recognition, along with the careful Scriptural reasoning that made the process possible. Philosophical theology has plenty of strengths, but among its weaknesses is the fact that its practitioners are so enamored of clearly defining and defending truth claims that they generally do not have the skill of tracing or understanding the exegetical path that leads to those truth claims. Philosophers sometimes seem to think of ancient texts as cumbersome delivery systems containing ideas which it is their job to extract from the delivery systems and do something with. Biblical studies professionals have a different metaphor for what they see philosophers doing: they seem to be climbing a ladder of biblical reasoning to a platform of truth, and then kicking away the ladder that got them there.

This strong social trinitarian model has its obvious problems, and these problems can be adjudicated within the canons and standards of philosophical theology: how is the divine unity thinkable on these lines,[52] how is strong social trinitarianism still

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[52] Some of the major threads of discussion have included a debate over whether Richard Swinburne's version of trinitarianism is unintentionally tritheistic, and whether relative identity or material composition are useful conceptual schemes for thinking through the threeness/oneness problem.

monotheistic, etc.[53] It is not as if these thinkers need the theologians to ride in as cavalry to save them from themselves. Their intellectual community is fully equipped to sort out the questions they raise, and is so constituted as to do it more rapidly and unambiguously than outside advisors could possibly manage. The full range of further questions can be argued within the same philosophical conceptualities. As this tradition of knowledge continues to ramify, I look forward to future discussions in which philosophical theologians begin to pose questions about the validity of the kind of three-member social trinitarianism which does not recognize any constitutive relationships of origin among the persons.[54]

For evangelical thought in general, however, the very fact that a separate discipline has formed which is going to carry out a theological discussion in its own language should be a matter of concern. The next generation of scholarship will witness evangelical systematic theology and evangelical philosophical theology develop into separate communities of discourse which are increasingly isolated from each other's literature and argumentation. The kind of systematic theology that is heavily informed by biblical exegesis and the history of doctrine would benefit greatly from the conceptual clarity which could be provided by the kind of philosophical theology which concentrates on analytic tasks. Similarly, philosophical theology could benefit greatly from a closer encounter with the great themes of the Christian heritage, and a better understanding of the Biblical logic by which these themes emerged into conceptual form. If serious interdisciplinary work is not undertaken soon, the two traditions will harden into separate tracks and set the stage for great conflicts later.

<center>V. Anti-Trinitarians Ascendant</center>

The final issue is that several varieties of anti-trinitarian churches which can be described as sociologically evangelical are beginning to make more sophisticated arguments which will soon demand the attention of evangelical theologians. Since there

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[53] See for instance Brian Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," in Steven T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins, SJ, eds., *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203-50; also Sarah Coakley, "'Persons' in the 'Social' Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion," in the same volume, 127-144.

[54] A new kind of argument focused on progressive revelation has been advanced by Dale Tuggy, "Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism," *Religious Studies* 40 (2004).

are always plenty of anti-trinitarian groups doing business, why are they especially worthy of mention in a survey of this kind? Let me hasten to say that it is not necessarily because they are growing numerically. Some evidence points to the opposite conclusion, that they are in fact shrinking and in membership trouble. Instead, their importance stems from the fact that they have chosen to set themselves on a course of higher academic achievement and a greater scholarly presence. The kind of anti-trinitarians worth watching right now are the ones who look and act like evangelicals, and are getting smarter. In the interest of time, I will only offer one major example: Oneness Pentecostalism.

"Oneness Pentecostalism" is a descriptive name for an anti-trinitarian religious movement that developed over the course of the twentieth century on the margins of evangelicalism. As a movement, it has existed in various denominational forms and organizations, with its largest current manifestation being the United Pentecostal Church International. Oneness Pentecostalism began in 1913 at a Pentecostal camp meeting in Arroyo Seco in southern California.[55] An evangelist named R. E. McAlister preached on the discrepancy between the command in Matthew 28:19 to "baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," and the Apostles' reported practice of baptizing in the name of the Lord, or of Jesus (Acts 2:38 et al). The sermon provoked at least two responses. First, a man named John Scheppe passed the evening meditating on the problem, and first thing in the morning ran through the camp shouting that he had been given a revelation: baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ was the true baptism. The second response was more measured, but ran along similar lines. Frank J. Ewart began pondering McAlister's sermon and discovered a way to harmonize the two baptisms: the name "Jesus" must be the actual name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one name into which we are to be baptized. He would later summarize this in the words, "I believe that the Apostles knew how to interpret Matthew 28:19," adding that "if one single, isolated example of Christian baptism could be found in the Bible to fit the

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[55] D. A. Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism," in *The Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M . Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 644-651.

trinitarian interpretation of the Great Commission there would be some excuse for intelligent people adopting it."[56]

In Ewart's hands, Oneness doctrine took on its basic outlines. The discovery of the right name into which to be baptized was revolutionary. If "Jesus" is the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, then Jesus is himself the exhaustive totality of what had mistakenly been called the Trinity. The ancient Christian doctrine of God would have to be modified drastically to fit the new "apostolic" understanding of baptism. Oneness teaching has developed since Ewart's time, but in his thought the basic elements are all present: the discovery of a new formula for baptism and a revision of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to put more focus on Jesus, whose name comprehends everything about God. The volatile combination of a new practice (re-baptism to achieve theological correctness) and new doctrine (anti-trinitarian Jesus-centered modalism) came to be known as "the new issue," a radical claim which demanded a decision, and it burned through early Pentecostalism like a wildfire. The fledgling Assemblies of God movement was forced to hold a number of general council meetings to render a decision about "the new issue," and in October 1916, Oneness teachers were expelled. It is worth noting that early Pentecostals were suffering through tremendous tensions of their own with mainline churches, and were strongly inclined to allow a diversity of views to flourish in any area where it seemed that the Spirit might be moving. But Oneness denial of the eternal pre-existence of the Son crossed a clear doctrinal line, and demanded expulsion even from the Assemblies of God.

One of the most difficult aspects of coming to terms with Oneness Pentecostalism is that these churches are culturally and sociologically evangelical. They have a high view of Scripture's authority, a heart for worship, a passion for evangelizing, and a commitment to living lives marked by holiness. Though they struggle with legalism, they are often marked by grace, and they certainly say all the right things about salvation by God's unilateral action of unmerited mercy. They teach and preach and sing and give and live like the sociological group we recognize as "evangelical Christians." Yet because of their serious doctrinal deviation, it is tempting to say that they are in the odd

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[56] Frank J. Ewart, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (St. Louis, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, n.d.), p. 16. Reprinted in Donald Dayton, ed., *Seven 'Jesus Only' Tracts* (NY: Garland Publishing, 1985)

position of being evangelical but not Christian. What do I mean by calling them non-Christian? I mean that it is possible to look across the surface of the whole world and back through two thousand years of Christian history and recognize, for all the differences of opinion and practice, such a thing as "the Christian thing." What C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity" is something real and recognizable. But that identifiably Christian thing is trinitarian. From the baptismal formula in the Great Commission itself, to the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, down through the Reformers and out to the fundamentalists, across the great divides that mark off Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Christian churches have argued that the right interpretation of the Bible is the trinitarian interpretation. In choosing a posture toward Oneness Pentecostalism as a movement, evangelical Christians find themselves standing squarely alongside Catholics and the Orthodox, saying (in the words of the National Association of Evangelicals' statement of faith) the same thing as intended by the Nicene theologians: "We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit." "Eternally existent" draws a sharp line against Oneness Pentecostalism, a line their movement began by drawing. The "New Issue" of Jesus-only baptism and Oneness doctrine caused this group to come out from the Assemblies of God and declare themselves separate. So convinced were early Oneness teachers of their distinctiveness and their mission, that when Assemblies churches would re-admit them to fellowship, they would immediately begin proselytizing and promoting the "New Issue" in the church.

On the other hand, along with the danger there is some promise in the kinder, gentler Oneness profile. It will be difficult for Oneness teachers to talk openly about their views in a winsome way without coming to terms with many problems in their historical legacy. Some of the advanced work going on at the UPCI's Urshan Graduate School of Theology already shows signs of moving toward real change in the direction of orthodoxy. Some scholars there are explicitly embracing the ancient Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ, which is no small feat for Oneness people. If their views are considered acceptable by the official UPCI and its churches, then Oneness Pentecostalism will have taken a substantive step toward clarifying their doctrinal position. So far, the only benefit I have seen from this clarification is that it enables us to focus more tightly

on the one or two real remaining points of division: the pre-existence of Christ, the eternal existence of the Trinity in three persons.

As Oneness Pentecostal representatives push for acceptance from evangelicals, they will sometimes be driven to downplay the importance of doctrinal distinctions. It is worth asking how they will handle serious doctrinal distortions in their own ranks. Recent years have indeed seen the outbreak of a major theological controversy within the ranks of Oneness: a handful of pastors have begun teaching that Christ did not receive a body from Mary, but rather that he brought it with him from heaven. This "divine flesh" Christology is driving UPCI headquarters to distraction, especially because it is centered in the ministry of a few pastors in Ethiopia, a church which the UPCI would like to be able to point to as a symbol of everything that is good, vital, and expanding in their movement. After sweating out a decision about whether Oneness believers are saved, it is rewarding to be able to watch them sweat out a similar decision with regard to some wild sheep in their own fold. In God's providence and care for his sheep involved in this deeply erroneous movement, it is worth praying that their scholars would begin to perceive points of real agreement as a sign that normal Christianity is a good tradition they should consider linking back up with. Similarly, we can pray that the breakout Oneness celebrities like T. D. Jakes notice that they sell more books and seminars when they preach and teach more like normal Christians. If Oneness commitments only close doors, and every move in the direction of historic biblical Christianity opens doors, perhaps the leaders of the movement will be prompted to reconsider even the core differences.

Another anti-trinitarian group that could be mentioned is the Church of God General Conference, also known as the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith. They are a different kind of anti-Trinitarian, holding to an essentially Socinian view in which Christ is merely human, but is the ultimate prophet sent by God and the bringer of God's Kingdom.[57] One of their most influential teachers is a biblical linguist named Sir Anthony Buzzard. In a 1998 book entitled *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's*

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[57] A good report on a related group is in Julian Clementson, "The Christadelphians and the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Evangelical Quarterly* 75:2 (2003), 157-176.

Self-Inflicted Wound,[58] and in numerous newsletters and websites, Buzzard has developed an argumentative style worth noting. His works are largely a regurgitation of old-fashioned Unitarian and Christadelphian literature, but the novel element in Buzzard's iteration of his tradition is that he reads widely in mainstream biblical scholarship and cites it copiously. The result is a strange quilt, an anti-trinitarian argument patched together from snippets of trinitarian biblical scholars. Anybody who has read independently in the literature will recognize the provenance of his quotations, and will be able to interpret them properly in the original contexts. Buzzard is clearly not being responsible in his interaction with the authors he cites, but is ransacking their work, decontextualizing it in search of support for his fixed idea. Nevertheless, it is astonishing how much material he is able to generate using this method. Reading his composite essays gives the impression that there has been a mass movement of deserters from the trinitarian cause, of Bible scholars having abandoned one exegetical position after another along the front that once held solid against Unitarianism. In one place Buzzard provides a string of quotations rejecting any hint of pre-existence in John's prologue or in Philippians 2; in another place he cites authorities who take "Son of God" language as merely indicative of the Davidic messiah; in a third place he agrees with a host of scholars who situate some New Testament "Spirit of God" language in an Old Testament context wherein it signifies a poetic hypostatization of God in action. In any given case, he may be right about the exegesis or about the scholarly consensus on it. However, Buzzard approaches as an old-fashioned anti-trinitarian fighter, and never misses the chance to interpret such exegesis as a concession to his movement and an opportunity for advance against the Trinity. This style of argument bears close watching, mixing truth and deception, scholarship and chicanery as it does.[59]

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[58] Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* (International Scholars Publications, 1998).

[59] In 1910, Richard J. Knowling (1851-1919) published an essay entitled "Some Recent Criticism in its Relation to the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," in his *Messianic Interpretation and Other Studies* (London: SPCK, 1910), 38-84. He was especially concerned to confront the critical claims of Harnack, Strauss, Delitzsch, and some other critics, not as isolated bits of exegesis, but as they tended toward the undermining of the doctrine of the Trinity. Knowling was no fundamentalist, but writing in 1910 in this manner, he was taking part in the same anti-modernist conservative movement that produced the 12 volumes of *The Fundamentals* a few years later. Is there a place today for such scholarship, which leaves room for exegetical independence in biblical studies, but also keeps watch over the larger front of entire

There is nothing new in this contemporary re-airing of classic Socinian exegesis. Richard Muller has observed that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "the problem of antitrinitarian exegesis was, certainly, the most overtly intense of the issues faced by the Reformers and their successors, given the Protestant emphasis on the priority of the biblical norm." Muller goes on to document how "the orthodox found themselves in the very difficult position of arguing a traditional view of the Trinity against an antitrinitarian exegesis that appeared, in a few instances, to represent the results of text criticism and, in a few other instances, to represent a literal exegesis of text over against an older allegorism or typological reading." [60] What was occurring in the era after the Reformation, and is continuing today, is a massive "alteration of patterns of interpretation away from the patristic and medieval patterns that had initially yielded the doctrine of the Trinity and given it a vocabulary consistent with traditional philosophical usage."[61] What makes work like Buzzard's worth watching is that he is able to mobilize such a vast array of mainstream biblical scholarship in defense of his isolated views. If Socinus were around today, in other words, he would find the guild of biblical studies much more broadly in agreement with him. That is not the same as calling modern biblical studies Socinian, but it does indicate where there is work to be done.

These five developments are, I submit, key issues in the field of trinitarian theology as it is practiced by evangelical theologians now and in the foreseeable future. Recurring themes that have emerged in this survey are (1) the need for interdisciplinary theological work that spans biblical, historical, philosophical and systematic theological projects; (2) attention to the way in which some traditional biblical warrants are becoming less persuasive at the same time as new warrants are emerging to replace them; and (3) the key role that evangelicals can play by staying true to their heritage as thinkers who are committed to Scripture, alert to apologetic concerns, drawn to spiritual application, respectful of the grand theological tradition, and concerned for conceptual clarity. Why

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doctrines and their biblical warrant? From what post could such a watchman today announce that among the thousand isolated details a definite trend was becoming evident?

[60] Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), Volume Four: The Triunity of God, 62.

[61] Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 62.

will it take a concerted effort by the entire theological faculty to take up this task of framing a contemporary trinitarian theology? Because the Trinity is a large-scale doctrine that implicates every area of Christian understanding. The story of modern theology has two conspicuous elements: a major downward trend in the credibility and importance of trinitarianism,[62] and the fragmentation of the theological curriculum into multiple unrelated specialized disciplines.[63] These two plot elements are not unrelated. The fragmentation of the theological enterprise is directly connected to the modern difficulty with holding onto a meaningful trinitarianism. Pulling together for the Trinity will pull us together as a theological faculty, and pulling together as a faculty will pull us toward the Trinity.[64]

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[62] One version of that story is told in "The Marginalization of the Trinity," in William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

[63] Though much has been written since, the best telling of the story is still Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

[64] John Webster indicates a broad and "frankly utopian" sketch of a unified theological faculty at conclusion of his *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chapter 4: "Scripture, Theology and the Theological School."