

Trinitarian Theology's Exegetical Basis: A Dogmatic Survey



FRED SANDERS*

*Associate Professor of Theology
Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University
La Mirada, CA 90639
fred.sanders@biola.edu*

One of the chief obligations laid upon trinitarian theology in our time is that it renders the doctrine of the Trinity with unprecedented clarity as a *biblical* doctrine, or, to speak more precisely, as a doctrine that is in the Bible. If there ever was a time when theology could afford to hurry past this task, with an impatient wave of the hand in the general direction of scripture, that time is not now. It is not enough to show that the doctrine is capable of harmonizing with biblical themes, or to settle for the double-negative claim that it is at least not unbiblical. Nor can we any longer afford to displace the weight of this burden onto a temporary resting place like tradition or the consent of all the faithful, lest that prop suffer the strains of bearing what it was never intended to support. Nor, finally, can we encumber this doctrinal field with a jumble of unworthy and unserious arguments and illustrations. For we have come to a stage of crisis with regard to this doctrine. A prominent feature of the current era is the growing unpersuasiveness and untenability of the traditional proof texts that were used to establish and demonstrate the doctrine. In this context, it is imperative that whenever we handle the doctrine of the

*Dr. Sanders is the author *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* forthcoming in August from Crossway Publishers. He has written and published extensively on the doctrine of the Trinity, including the entry on that central Christian doctrine for *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Trinity, we handle it as a doctrine that is both known to be and shown to be biblical.

I. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS A HELPER IN THE TASK OF EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

In the middle ages, theologians like Thomas Aquinas warned against using weak arguments for sacred doctrines, lest the believer be exposed to the *irrisioem infidelium*,¹ the mockery of unbelievers, when they see us believing Christian claims on risibly inadequate grounds. It is the task of this paper to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is, in fact, well grounded in the gospel and well attested in the Scriptures, and, furthermore, that this doctrine was not waiting for any new arguments from the theological journals before it attained credibility. Considered in itself, the doctrine is already credible and biblical. Nevertheless, trinitarianism as it exists in the minds of most believers, many Biblical scholars, and some theologians in our time is a jumble of highly suspect proof texts, unarticulated assumptions, buried premises, loud non-sequiturs, and obtuse analogies. It is a congeries of Hebrew divine plurals, shamrocks, Melchizedeks, ice cubes, and random occurrences of the number three in Bible stories. In the field of Biblical studies, the overall trend of sober historical-grammatical labors has been toward the gradual removal of the trinitarian implications of passage after passage. Some of these passages were, in fact, never anything but trinitarian mirages: 1 John 5's "three that bear witness in heaven," for example, was rightly dismantled by the first generation of textual criticism. Other texts, like those where the word *monogenes* is used, are still matters of contention because of the disparity between the traditional and the modern translations. But all the proofs have descended into the valley of divided details without clear connections that would bind them into a recognizable doctrine, much less warrant the average New Testament scholar, acting in his or her professional capacity, to believe that God is the Trinity.

The service that systematic theology can provide in the present state of disorder is not to do the exegesis itself, nor to dictate in advance what the exegetes are required to find. The lines of authority in the shared, interdisciplinary task of Christian theology do not run in that direction, nor with such directness. But the theologian can draw attention to the

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *S.T.* 1.32.1 resp. In context, his point is that this kind of mockery is the consequence of trying to prove the revealed doctrine of the Trinity using arguments from natural reason; he does not have in view the question of the worthiness of individual arguments drawn from scripture.

larger structures within which the exegetical laborers can do their skilled work. My hope is that a survey and description of the proper foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity can make it plain where meaningful work is to be done by qualified investigators. It is these larger structures that make sense of the individual bits of information that go into the doctrine of the Trinity. We will come at last to those bits of information, but there are two primary dogmatic structures we must first attend to. One is the trinitarian hinge between the Old and New Testaments, the canonical nexus which is the happy hunting ground for trinitarian theology. But that hinge is situated within another, more comprehensive structure which is revelation. By “revelation” I mean the character of biblical revelation itself as a manifold union of historical event and inspired textual witness.

But this manifold unity of biblical revelation is precisely what modern theology has struggled unsuccessfully to hold together. One of the achievements of twentieth-century trinitarian thought was the refocusing of attention onto the economy of salvation, but this led many prominent theologians since Karl Rahner to attempt to derive the doctrine of the Trinity entirely from the events of salvation history, as distinct from the scriptural witness. In attempting this transcendental deduction of the doctrine of God from the events of the economy of salvation, it is clear that these theologians were in reaction against the style of atomistic text-collation that characterized biblicistic proofs of the doctrine in previous generations, proofs of the sort that gather up the scattered arguments of Scripture and combine them to produce the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus, to a remarkable degree, modern Trinitarians have felt forced to choose between event on the one hand, or Scripture on the other hand, as the basis of the doctrine.

Neither approach is adequate to have produced the doctrine of the Trinity in the first place, and neither serves fully to explain or defend it. The doctrine of the Trinity is rather a conceptual foregrounding of the entire matrix of economic revelation, and must be approached from a place in which all the events of the economy and all the words of Scripture hang together with an inner unity. It is senseless to try to retain the result of the early church’s holistic interpretation of Scripture—the perception of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity—without cultivating, in a way appropriate for our own time, the interpretative practice which produced that result. The one pre-modern interpretative practice which is crucial for the doctrine of the Trinity is not the infamous allegorical exegesis, nor the florid development of the *sensus plenior*, nor the other shockingly holistic or quaintly self-referential moves the church fathers

were always perpetrating with Scripture²—moves which, as Bonaventure said of the humility of St. Francis, are portents more to be admired than imitated.³ No, the single crucial interpretative practice, both for exegesis and for systematic theology, is attention to the economy of salvation as a coherent whole.

The term “economy of salvation” is an ancient one, but it has been revived in contemporary theological literature and become a piece of theological jargon, so let us unfold its meaning and use a bit. The economy of salvation is the flawlessly-designed way that God administers his gracious self-giving. When God gives himself to be the salvation of his people, he does not do so in a haphazard or random way. God's *agape* is never sloppy. He has a plan, and he follows a procedure that is both premeditated and perfectly proportioned. When Paul talks about God's economy (*oikonomia*), his point is that God is a supremely wise administrator who has arranged the elements of his plan with great care. To give our attention to God's way of carrying out this economy is to be instructed in the mystery of his will, and to gain insight into the eternal purpose of his divine wisdom.

The instruction that we receive from scanning the economy of God is a deliberate sequence of lessons from God. God has, in fact, carried out the central events of the economy with definite communicative intent, the intent of making himself known to us in them. The economy of salvation is simultaneously the economy of revelation, which teaches us things about God because God intends it to do so. Specifically, God's intention is for the economy of salvation to teach us who he is. It is in the central events of this economy that God has actively and intentionally expressed his character and identified himself.

These central events of the economy are the sending of the Son and the Spirit. The apostles met these two persons, sent by the unmet first person. Their coming is the historical event, the first aspect of revelation. But the church was also clearly told the meaning of this event in words, the form of sound doctrine that was not from human initiative, but was breathed out by God through men moved by God. We have been notified

² Perhaps the modern retrieval of patristic exegesis has already passed through its enthusiastic phase and is entering a phase of greater caution. A book that is instructively located at the boundary between the two phases is John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno's *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

³ Bonaventure, *Life of Francis*, 6:2. Available in the *Bonaventure* volume of *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (trans. Ewert Cousins; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 230.

that in these last days, God has spoken by a son, and that the name of God into which we baptize and are baptized is the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We did not invent these terms as our best guess at the meaning of the economy. The first Christians received these propositions from the same God who gave himself in the history of the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Filled with that knowledge and insight, classic trinitarianism learned to interpret rightly what had occurred, and took up the task of reading Scripture for further clarity about the Trinity.

II. THE CANONICAL HINGE AND PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

This description of the relationship between event and text brings us to the trinitarian hinge between the two testaments. The actual revelation, strictly speaking, of the Trinity was the historical sendings of the Son and the Spirit. The documents of the Old Testament always looked forward to the revelation, while the documents of the New Testament already looked back to the revelation. This observation may have a Barthian ring to it, but that is only because Karl Barth was right on this point. To banish the specter of a neo-orthodox tendency to drive a wedge between Scripture and revelation, between the word of God on one hand the Bible on the other, let me assure you that this event-word distinction is central to the trinitarian theology of no less conservative a bibliologist than B. B. Warfield.

In his classic essay on the doctrine of the Trinity in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*,⁴ Warfield rather oddly affirmed that the doctrine is biblical, but denied that it was revealed in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. “We cannot speak of the doctrine of the Trinity,” said Warfield,

as revealed in the New Testament, any more than we can speak of it as revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written before its revelation; the New Testament after it. The revelation itself was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit. The relation of the two Testaments to this revelation is in the one case that of preparation for it, and in the other that of product of it. The revelation itself is embodied just in Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁵

⁴ Reprinted in his *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 22-59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Historically speaking, this observation is trivial enough: first comes Jesus, then the Gospels. But two significant corollaries follow from the sequence event-then-document. First, the sequence accounts for the oblique way in which the New Testament contains trinitarian elements. The authors of the New Testament seem to be already in possession of a trinitarian understanding of God, one that they serenely decline to bring to full articulation. The clearest trinitarian statements in the New Testament do not occur in the context of teachings about God or Christ, but as almost casual allusions or brief digressions in the middle of discourse about other things.

The second corollary is that we should not seek to construct the doctrine of the Trinity from the words of the New Testament alone, where it is not properly revealed so much as presupposed. Instead, we must develop hermeneutical approaches and exegetical skills that let us read the New Testament in the spirit of its own composition: with constant reference back to the revelation in Christ and the Spirit. Our Trinitarian theology should be demonstrated from Scripture, but in a way that recognizes the priority of the actual revelation in events, and the dependent character of the inspired texts.

The third corollary is that we should expect the strongest arguments for the doctrine of the Trinity to be found along those seams where the Old Testament's prospective witness and the New Testament's retrospective witness are both present in overlap. That is, the doctrine of the Trinity is best established in an extended thematic study of the way the New Testament uses the Old Testament in its talk of God and salvation. This happy fact is a link between the state of scholarship in the twenty-first century and the second, as we are currently living in a kind of golden age of mature studies of the use of Old Testament by the New Testament.⁶ And in the second century with the ancient Jewish canon and the recent documents of the New Testament before him, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote a short, classic theological work⁷ in which he argued two major points: The Bible is one coherent book in two testaments, and God is triune. The prophetic and apostolic witnesses, together, determine the shape and certainty of the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁶ On top of the wealth of journal articles, see the comprehensive reference work entitled *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); and the important survey *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁷ Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997). The work is from about the year 175.

C. Kavin Rowe has recently argued that “the two-testament canon read as one book presses its interpreters to make ontological judgments about the trinitarian nature of the one God *ad intra* on the basis of its narration of the act and identity of the biblical God *ad extra*.”⁸ Indeed, he says that “it is safe to say that the doctrine of the Trinity would never have arisen on the basis of the Old or New Testaments in isolation.”⁹

This trinitarian hinge is the place for important work on the exegetical basis of trinitarian theology, and research in this area will be able to locate and identify a host of new demonstrations of the elements of trinitarian theology. The field is wide and requires the implements of professional exegetes for its cultivation, so I name only a few instances here to indicate the sort of work that is possible. C. Kavin Rowe’s own treatment of the name LORD in the narrative of Luke-Acts is one example of the new approaches proving fruitful in recent years;¹⁰ Richard Bauckham’s reading of how Isaiah’s theology informs John’s Gospel is another.¹¹ The baptismal command of Matthew 28 seems to be a re-interpretation of Daniel 7’s vision of the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man, and the heavenly host, blended with the Levitical blessing of Numbers 6 with its threefold occurrence of the revealed name of God followed by the summary, “Thus shall you put my name on the people.”¹²

There is great promise here. In fact, it seems to me that creative new ways of demonstrating the doctrine of the Trinity are emerging even more rapidly than the old traditional proofs fell away. This changing of the guard need not be alarming, nor is it a signal that Christian theologians are merely ideologically motivated to find any arguments that serve to prop up their ready-made conclusions, being clever enough to devise new ones as fast as the old wear out. Instead, we, like the more ancient generations of Christians, are under the authority and guidance of the Word of God and are walking along after it, attempting to articulate for our own intellectual cultures, and in our own idioms and canons of

⁸ C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” *ProEccl* 11.3 (Summer 2002), 308.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁰ C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The LORD in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

¹¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

¹² Benedict T. Viviano, O. P., “The Trinity in the Old Testament, from Daniel 7:13-14 to Matthew 28:19,” in *Trinity – Kingdom – Church: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitat-Verlag, 2001).

persuasiveness, what we see and understand. We are all catching up with the Bible. Our task in this age is not to cast about looking for ways to replace yesterday's superannuated arguments, but to articulate as faithfully as possible what we find in Scripture.

Most of the work ahead in re-articulating trinitarian theology's exegetical basis will be verse-to-verse combat, working back and forth across that trinitarian hinge between the testaments. However, we can describe the overall pattern into which the detailed investigations will fall. They will fill out what I call retrospective prosoponic identification and convergent hyperfulfillment.

III. RETROSPECTIVE PROSOPONIC IDENTIFICATION

Taking our stand on the ground of the New Testament, looking back through its witness to the events of the incarnation and Pentecost, we are able to ask relevant questions of the Old Testament witness. Having met Christ and the Spirit, we can look for them in the Old Testament in a way we could not have without having met them in person. This practice is retrospective prosoponic identification. It names a strategy for reading the Old Testament initiated in the New Testament and carried forward by the post-apostolic church. Patristics scholar Michael Slusser has described it in similar terms as prosopographic exegesis, a "practice of discerning the speakers or prosopa in reading scripture."¹³ The right question in various complex Old Testament passages is, in general, "who is talking?" Slusser says that for the church fathers this inquiry after prosopa was not only "a tool for literary analysis and historical identification, but also and especially one of spiritual perception and theological elaboration." One reason this is important is that this practice is the source of basic trinitarian vocabulary like the word "person." It was "the source of the use of the word person/prosopon in Christian theology." The most striking instance of the prosoponic question being applied as a reading strategy in the New Testament itself is the Ethiopian eunuch asking about Isaiah 53, "of whom does the prophet speak by this? Of himself or of someone else?"

Let me underline, however, the retrospective aspect of this reading strategy: Only because of the advent of Christ and the Spirit can we seek to go back and identify them. If we immerse ourselves in the Old Testament world itself, without reference to our place in progressive revelation, we would not draw securely trinitarian conclusions. For instance, the Old Testament is gloriously replete with an array of poetic

¹³ Michael Slusser, "The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology," *TS* 49.3 (1988), 463.

personifications of God's presence and power. God characteristically uses evocative circumlocutions to describe the way he is personally present and active among his people: Moses asks God for a promise to accompany him, and God responds that he will send his angel, in whom he will put his name. God is present by presence; "the presence" becomes a way of referring to God. His hand, voice, will, wisdom, glory, arm, breath, law, and so on, are all put forth as his way of being God with us. And sometimes these terms are strikingly personified or hypostasized. To take the trinitarian step of selecting two of them as actual persons, distinct subsistences eternally abiding within the one divine nature, seems arbitrary and capricious. If we are to promote any of these "figures of speech" to full personhood, why not all of them, leading to a dozen persons in the Godhead?

The answer can only be that we are to approach the Old Testament from this side, asking not, "which of these personifications is somebody?" but "can Christ and the Spirit, whom we have met at the turning of the ages, be picked out retrospectively from among the many rays of God's old covenant glory?" And in asking this, we are not simply trying to interpret the events of God's self-revelation, but also the text of his self-revelation. For we are told clearly enough that it is the Word who became flesh. We may also affirm that the wisdom became flesh, or that the arm of the Lord was revealed in Christ, but in each case we are only underlining the same retrospective prosoponic identification.

The principle obviously needs to be extended to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This pneumatological extension is not simply parallel to the work done with the Son of God, because the Spirit is a different person from the Son, and his difference is registered on both sides of the canonical hinge. In the Old Testament, the range of possible allusions to him and the relevant semantic domains are considerably more extensive and indefinite than is the case with the Son. And in the New Testament, the Spirit continues to be revealed in more oblique ways, always with reference to the more direct manifestation of the Son. Nevertheless, the exegetical materials are sufficient for carrying out the pneumatological extension of the process of retrospective prosoponic identification. When this is done at a sufficient level of detail and correlated systematically with the Christological investigations, trinitarian interpretation reaches a kind of conceptual stabilization. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are discernible in their structured, revelatory, economic relations to each other. This pattern of relation can then be recognized as a free self-communication of God in salvation history. Because I am only undertaking an initial dogmatic survey here for the guidance of exegetical studies, it is prudent to prescind from the full-blown, elaborate trinitarianism that has historically resulted from

successful and thorough-going exegesis: the eternal immanent processions which ground the temporal missions.

IV. CONVERGENT HYPERFULFILLMENT

The second pattern to be observed is the way lines of thought which seem to emerge from the Old Testament witness along trajectories which diverge from each other, are in fact revealed to have been converging toward each other in God's economy of salvation and revelation. Thus in the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit, all God's ways are fulfilled, but they are more than fulfilled, or hyperfulfilled, because they all converge on the events at the trinitarian hinge of the canon. This convergent hyperfulfillment is most manifest in Jesus, who is both David's son and David's lord, the root and the branch of Jesse. Taught to look for a messianic son, a suffering servant, a prophet greater than Moses, and the Lord himself, the apostles met them all in one person. Some of this convergent hyperfulfillment can just be asserted on the basis of the personal advent of the Son and Spirit. But for the exegetical case, much depends on demonstrating that, according to the witness of the New Testament, the Lord and the apostles understood the Old Testament in precisely this manner. They drew these conclusions in arguments about David's son being David's lord (Matt 22:41-46), in their use of layered Old Testament fulfillments, and in numerous other ways. And much depends on showing that even the highest points of the Old Testament witness manifest an awareness of the coming convergence: That Psalm 110 (the text mobilized by Jesus in Matt 22) is already drawing together priest and king, and that the later chapters of Isaiah envision a servant whose completed work is indistinguishable from the presence of the Lord in person, matters a great deal. Convergence discernible within the Old Testament witness is the ground of convergent hyperfulfillment in the New Testament witness, which alone enables a theological interpretation broad enough to establish the doctrine of the Trinity.

Traditionally, appeals to convergent hyperfulfillment have centered on the Christological aspect of the biblical witness. But one of the ways that the categories of classic trinitarian theology can inform exegetical investigations is by reminding us that the pneumatological aspect is equally significant. In fact, the locus of hyperfulfillment is not simply the coming of the Son, but the coming of the Son and the Spirit together in the fullness of time on the mission of God the Father. The messiah is the anointed one. If the symbolism of anointing is kept in mind, and the Spirit's role in anointing functions as a live metaphor, then the best term for the point of convergence is that it is *messianic*: The Son who is

constituted as Christ by the anointing of the Spirit is the focal point. This reminder is very helpful in keeping the hyperfulfillment argument from converging on such a narrow point (Jesus considered abstractly, in isolation from the Spirit and the Father) that it comes to seem forced and artificial. That sort of artificiality would only open the doctrine up again to the *irrisioem infidelium*, but the solution is to be more comprehensively trinitarian rather than less so.

It should also be emphasized that all of the interpretive maneuvers we have outlined so far, from negotiating the canonical hinge, to working out retrospective prosoponic identifications, to tracing the lines of convergent hyperfulfillment, are only possible because of an implicit logic that is eschatological. These moves are only possible in the case of a definitive and unsurpassable self-revelation of God, and would lose their persuasiveness and necessity if they were only provisional developments along an ongoing trajectory. The opening passage of the book of Hebrews sketches out the fundamentally eschatological logic that is to be followed. According to Heb 1:1-2, the pluriform modes of divine disclosure in the Old Testament are all gathered, fulfilled, and surpassed in the coming of the one who antedates creation itself, yet whose personal identity as the all-inheriting Son of the Father has only been unveiled eschatologically. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” All the major authors of the New Testament advance similar claims to the finality of what they have seen in Christ, and that eschatological definitiveness is what makes the trinitarian interpretive moves not just possible, but urgent and necessary. There are no other hinges in the canon to compare with the one between the covenants; there are no further divine persons to identify retrospectively; and there is only one convergence-point of the lines of messianic hyperfulfillment. Käsemann famously asserted that “apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology,”¹⁴ and it is true in the case of the exegetical foundations of the doctrine of the Trinity. Eschatology is the mother of all trinitarian theology.

V. THE PIECEMEAL PROOF

Finally, the front line of trinitarianism’s exegetical demonstration is going to continue to be a synthetic interpretive move in which the parts

¹⁴ Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” in *New Testament Questions of Today* (trans. W. J. Montague; ed. Ernst Käsemann; London, UK: SCM Press, 1969), 82-107.

of the doctrine are identified and assembled. This traditional mode of demonstration can be called the piecemeal proof. Practitioners prove the various elements of the doctrine and then assemble them. This mode of argument, while it can be carried out in an uninspiring and disjointed way, is nevertheless appropriate to the character of trinitarian revelation, because the various propositions are not assembled thematically in any single tract of Scripture. For this reason, it will always be appropriate to demonstrate, in serial fashion, that the Son is divine, then that the Spirit is a distinct person, then that they are not the Father, and to conclude by re-establishing that there is only one God. These arguments then combine to yield a set of propositions which must be reconciled with each other, resulting in a doctrine of one God in three persons.

However, it is worth remembering that the piecemeal proof has a naturally fragmentary tendency, and that as a result it colludes with the spirit of the modern age in a way that does not serve the needs of trinitarian theology. Emphasizing one sub-topic at a time, it can only with difficulty climb back up to the level of the comprehensive judgment necessary to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. The whole thrust of this article, with the hermeneutical maneuvers it commends, is to reinstate large, comprehensive structures of meaning. The doctrine of the Trinity requires such comprehensive patterns of thought, and does not thrive unless those patterns are cultivated. Trinitarianism was at its lowest ebb in modern theology when it was thought to stand or fall with a series of individual arguments, or even to await the conclusions drawn from the inductive gathering of numerous exegetical fragments. A case in point is the Anglican philosopher and priest Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), whose 1712 book *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* undertook an exhaustive investigation of every verse of Scripture which provides evidence for trinitarianism. Clarke printed and commented on these verses in his massive book, and gathered them under the headings of fifty-five propositions constitutive of his construal of scriptural trinitarianism. This method, though bearing some resemblance to earlier projects, was characteristically modernist: it was the kind of inductive approach one would expect from a philosophical member of Newton's circle during the period of the exhilarating rise and formulation of modern science. Clarke's approach to the Trinity is an instance of an early modern tendency to press the methods of the natural sciences into service in every field, including fields where they are not methodologically appropriate. The doctrine of the Trinity is a particularly integral doctrine which cannot be formulated in the fragmentarily inductive way Clarke, or other critical moderns, attempted.

In particular, the most crucial conceptual step that must be taken is the move from the events of the economy of salvation to the eternal life

of God. Therefore, even while assembling the elements of the piecemeal proof, we must be especially sensitive to passages and lines of argument that drive us to the affirmation of the immanent Trinity. This is the crucial step, and it is a step taken with the fewest explicit and concise expressions: verses. And this is a warning about how the piecemeal proof is to be deployed. Because of the uniquely integral character of the doctrine of the Trinity, it resists being formulated bit by bit from fragmentary elements of evidence. The atomistic approach can never accomplish or ground the necessary transposition of the biblical evidence from the salvation-history level to the transcendent level of the immanent Trinity. Such a transposition requires first the ability to perceive all of the economic evidence at once, including the intricately structured relations among the three persons. As a coherent body of evidence, then, that economic information can be rightly interpreted as a revelation of God's own life. To make the jump from economy to Trinity, the interpreter must perceive the meaningful form of a threefold divine life circulating around the work of Christ. What psychologists of perception call a *gestalt*, a recognizably unified coherent form, is what the trinitarian interpreter must identify in the economy. This triune form, once recognized, can then be understood as enacting, among us, the contours of God's own triune life. He is among us what he is in himself: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is only an initial systematic-theological survey of the exegetical basis of trinitarian theology. It is not the last word, and is not intended to announce in advance, from the high table of dogmatics, what exegetes are supposed to go out and find in obedience to the claims of a system. But it does attempt to illuminate the fact that Christians, whatever their theological training, are not simply poring over Scripture as if for the first time, to see what we might find. We have been given guidance from a much higher table, about what we are to seek in God's holy word. And there is much still to be seen in that word, more than the theological tradition, pre-modern, modern, or post-modern, has yet succeeded in noting and articulating.¹⁵

¹⁵ This article is based on a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in New Orleans in 2009.