Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity: Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume III*. Fort Wayne, IN: Luther Academy, 2016, xvii + 393pp. $39.99 hbk, $29.99 pb.

To those on the outside of its institutions and traditions, Lutheranism can sometimes seem like a parallel universe. Even when Lutheran theologians are writing about doctrines with a common ecumenical status (and the Trinity is such a doctrine par excellence), they have an alternative set of dialogue partners, publishing houses and channels of distribution. Carl Beckwith's *The Holy Trinity*, for instance, is volume three (the seventh to appear in order of publication) of a projected thirteen-volume series on confessional Lutheran dogmatics in the works since the 1980s. It would be easy for theologians from other confessions to

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overlook this entry from a small Lutheran publishing house, but it would be a shame if they did so. The tradition of Lutheran confessional dogmatics is astonishingly rich, and it has much to offer for contemporary trinitarian theology.

Beckwith's book is a contemporary dogmatic statement that follows the clearly marked lines of the Lutheran confessions and works extensively with a series of authoritative Lutheran theologians. The German Reformer himself is here, of course, as is Melanchthon. But the unjustly neglected Johann Gerhard looms largest in Beckwith's constructive account of Lutheran Trinitarianism, and we also hear from Abraham Calov, Martin Chemnitz and Johann Andreas Quenstedt ('the bookkeeper of Lutheran orthodoxy', as Dorner nicknamed him).

Beckwith's task is to present an account of trinitarian theology that is distinctively Lutheran, but not so distinctive that it shows itself parochial or even sectarian. This is Trinitarianism of the great catholic tradition, carried out with resources to which all the churches should attend. Lutheran systematic theologians were of course major contributors to the revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in modern theology: Pannenberg, Jenson and Jüngel have been major figures, and it is striking that even Reformed theologians like Moltmann and Barth have more Luther than Calvin in their footnotes when talking about the Trinity. We might even hazard the generalization that where the modern discussion has been most revisionist (in parting ways from classical theism, for instance), the Lutheran influence has been most conspicuous. Beckwith brings in an altogether different sort of Lutheran Trinitarianism, one whose voice has not been prominent in the conversation in recent decades, but whose credentials are self-evident.

The most striking feature of Beckwith's presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity is that it rests its case on a very conservative doctrine of Scripture. Beckwith identifies modern theology's deepest problem as 'the loss of faith in the historical reliability of the Scriptures, in the truth of the Bible as God's Word, and in the providentially ordered language of faith'. Beckwith instead presupposes a unified canon of Scripture in which the triune author communicates verbally. He argues for a supernatural view of history in which God makes his presence known through a series of carefully designed interventions and manifestations; an economy of revelation and salvation as witnessed in a comprehensive, inspired text. The difference this doctrine of Scripture makes for the doctrine of the Trinity is evident throughout the book, from its main lines of argument to its modes of demonstration.

The book has fifteen chapters constituting three parts. In Part One, 'On God', Beckwith confronts certain contemporary epistemological restrictions that seek to limit effective speech about God on the basis of revelation. It is in this approach to the knowledge of God that Beckwith considers the Lutheran tradition to have something of its own to contribute to Trinitarianism. The Lutheran approach to God is, on Beckwith's account, very pessimistic about the ability of human powers to attain knowledge of God. Beckwith not only rejects natural theology, but also insists that optimism about the powers of human reason tends to correlate with a weak view of the noetic effects of sin, which in turn suggests a rather clouded awareness of grace. The Lutheran approach to knowing God not only takes

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seriously the mind's fallenness, but also locates all knowledge of God within the relation of faith in God, rather than in some supposedly objective doctrine about God. Beckwith limns this distinctiveness, in part, by contrasting it with a medieval tendency toward rationalism and overconfidence in reason's ability to know God.

Part Two, 'On the Trinity', is a presentation of the revelation of the triune God in Scripture. Beckwith notes that in modern times there has been a shift in the location of the doctrine of the Trinity: it now is to be found in systematic theologies, whereas in pre-modern times it was primarily found in commentaries on Scripture. Beckwith's doctrine of Scripture underwrites the development of his case that Trinitarianism is the result of reading the Bible as a continuous work from Genesis to Revelation, authored by the Trinity.

This central section of the book richly displays the traditional Lutheran account of how the Trinity is in the Old Testament (as disclosed by the narrative identification of Israel's God and by the use of divine names and titles) as well as in the New (as disclosed in the Father–Son relation, the apostolic use of Psalm 110 and so on). The Father–Son relation is foundational, and Beckwith builds on that foundation with a separate introduction of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. He affirms the monarchy of the Father in the internal processions, and argues not only for the filioque, but also for the importance of teaching it explicitly.

In this biblical section there is a running polemic against certain modes of modern historical criticism of the Bible, including the alleged distinction between functional and ontological Christologies. Beckwith also points out that modern historians of doctrine focus overmuch on the creedal results of patristic reflection, thereby distracting their own attention from the much more extensive exegetical deliberations of the Fathers. It is easier to read a short creed than a long commentary. But the cumulative effect of overlooking the role of scriptural commentary for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity has been catastrophic. These modern pathologies, and others like them, created a situation in which the Hellenization thesis seemed plausible to many and still refuses to die. Beckwith's rehearsal and updating of seventeenth-century decisions is a protest against those modern presuppositions.

Part Three moves from Scripture to the lexicon of technical terms and categories that the Christian churches have developed in speaking of the Trinity. Beckwith's treatment of the key concepts and terms is thorough and orderly. He pays special attention to what distinguishes the persons from each other, and to this end he makes much of Augustine's distinction between substantive and relative predication. In a fascinating excursus, Beckwith documents how the Augustinian rule of inseparable operations ('the works of the Trinity ad extra are undivided') acquired what he calls 'the Lutheran addendum' which further specifies that 'the properties of each person, of course, are preserved'. In modern theology, the Augustinian rule has often been accused of stinginess, as if it kept the Trinity locked up in itself and evacuated the economy of the direct presence of the persons. Beckwith argues that Augustine always had more to say than what the portable rule encapsulates, and that the Lutheran addendum makes explicit the richer connection between the internal and external acts of the Trinity.

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The theologians of Lutheran orthodoxy made appreciative use of Aquinas in their handling of the doctrine of the Trinity, and his influence, especially as an interpreter of Augustine, is evident in this section. In Part One, when talking about natural knowledge of God, Beckwith had ranged Aquinas more or less on the side of the late medieval 'theologians of glory' who capitulated to an incipient rationalism. That Beckwith can cheerfully call him in as an ally in the work of classical Trinitarianism reassures readers that Beckwith is not captive to some large-scale narrative about good patristics, bad medievals and good Reformers. Here as throughout, we see this project's character as a theology that is Lutheran but not sectarian about it.

The readers most likely to benefit from this volume are those least familiar with the deep Lutheran resources Beckwith is working with. One sentence near the end of the book gives a glimpse of the richness and precision of these texts. Grappling with the difficult question of how much theology should attempt to say about the divine attributes 'in themselves', that is, abstracted from God's works, Beckwith shows that his tradition has brilliantly identified the issues at stake, but has not succeeded in making a definitive statement. Having canvassed the options, he concludes that 'we need the insights of Chemnitz's order, Gerhard's pastoral instincts, and Quenstedt's thoroughness and rigor'. If we generalize from that remark, we can see what Carl Beckwith has aimed at in this entire book: the best of confessional Lutheranism's orderly, pastoral and rigorous theology of the Trinity.

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