

Introduction

It was no lesser a figure than theologian Karl Barth who set forth the statement that the “doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation.”¹ If he was right, this means that a primary and foundational task for any serious theologian-to-be or an enlightened layperson would be to gain a basic mastery of the meaning, content, and significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. While there is a host of other doctrines and topics to be grappled with, few would question the primacy of the distinctively *Christian* understanding of God as Father, Son, and Spirit.

If a brief description were needed as a way of introduction for the potential reader regarding the nature and goal of this little book, something like the following statement, borrowed from theologian Stephen Holmes, would be as accurate as any:

This book is on a big-picture scale, necessarily. Covering in one brief volume two thousand years of debate over what is possibly the central topic of Christian devotion, together with the necessary biblical background, means that at every turn I have obscured details of debates, offered impressionistic sketches of complex positions, and otherwise done violence to scholarly ideals.²

Even with the “big picture” in mind, without having the luxury of turning over every stone on the long and winding road of the evolving trinitarian doctrine, one has to parse over details and aim at general accuracy. Hence, this account includes rather detailed documentation to serve the needs of the advanced student or the curious.

Furthermore, in order to lay out the landscape of a complex and multilayered terrain, even a basic textbook has to pay attention to the multiplicity of sources and resources. The important advice from the eminent Roman Catholic Jesuit theologian Gerald O’Collins is spot on. He reminds us that should we wish to acquire a comprehensive and dynamic picture of the meaning, significance, and developments of the trinitarian doctrine, “Christian believers have the task of looking at and drawing on three distinct, if interrelated, areas: (1) the historical experience of salvation which the scriptures record and which the teachers in the church have interpreted through the centuries; (2) the testimony of public worship; and (3) the experience of practicing discipleship today.”³

Regrettably, the limited scope of this short primer does not allow for a full exploration of all of these three types of resources. My main focus will be on the first aspect, namely biblical sources of the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the creedal pronouncements and theological constructions the church’s theologians have proposed throughout the centuries. Furthermore, I will be making a concerted effort to delve into some experiences and sources having to do with public and private spiritual life and discipleship, including charismatic experiences and visions.

It goes without saying that because of the nature of this short book as a primer, no constructive task will be attempted here (such an attempt can be found in the second book of my five-volume series, *Trinity and Revelation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* [Eerdmans, 2014, Part II]). Nor is it my goal to reconstruct—let alone to challenge the “mainline” scholarly opinion regarding—the historical reading of the trinitarian doctrine.⁴ Even for a professional historian, that

kind of reconstruction would require special expertise—and I am systematician, after all. Rather, I trust that after so much scholarly ink has been spent on documenting and interpreting trinitarian history, its main contours are well known and reliable enough to be trusted, and communicated to the new generation of theologians and other interested readers.

If there is any little constructive—or perhaps at least novel—element in this primer, it is the space devoted to the charismatic and mystical *experiences* of the Holy Spirit among the people of God. That conscious choice is based on the firm conviction that, with every Christian doctrinal topic, the spiritual experience of the church has to be consulted as an important guide toward a better understanding; and that this is even more the case with this particular theme.

The reader will notice, that throughout the narrative of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, direct citations from key historical theologians are inserted in the text (and at times, in the footnotes). This is intentional, in order to make it possible for the reader to have firsthand access to the actual writings on which the theological interpretation is based. Even when textbooks such as this one contain detailed, meticulous documentation concerning the historical sources, it is not realistic to expect that the reader has time to delve into those sources during the reading process. Hopefully, the presence of frequent citations from historical figures helps students and other interested persons to both appreciate the theological wisdom of our forebears and inspire them later to dig into this rich spiritual wellspring.

The plan of the book is simple and straightforward. Following the introduction, chapter 1 delves into the biblical background and sources of what became the fully established trinitarian doctrine during the first few hundred years and beyond. While no technical trinitarian doctrine was yet available in the biblical canon, nor even in the New Testament (NT), the deep and wide trinitarian experience of God as Father, Son, and Spirit gave impetus to and called for an intellectual clarification. The second chapter, the longest one, seeks to provide

a fairly detailed account of the long and winding road of the development of the *doctrine* of the Trinity in patristic theology, culminating in the authoritative ecumenical Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) and the many debates and clarifications around it. Since the history of the first three centuries particularly is focused on the clarification of the Father-Son relationship, with much less attention to the role and nature of the Spirit, chapter 3 will continue the patristic and creedal reflections with the accent on pneumatology. Only with the final establishment of the deity and equality of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Son and Father was a full-fledged, distinctively Christian *trinitarian* doctrine made possible.

After the patristic era (roughly speaking, beginning from the sixth century or so), I stand back somewhat from a consideration of historical-theological details, and the “big picture” approach finally takes the upper hand. The millennium-long era of medieval experiences and doctrinal developments both in the Greek-speaking Eastern church and Latin-speaking Western church will be the subject of chapter 4. Chapter 5 touches selectively on some important Reformation and modern developments, reconstructions, and challenges. Chapter 6 opens the windows into the rich and variegated twentieth- and twenty-first-century renaissance of trinitarian reflection, although the many details of that story itself are left to other works (such as my *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2007]).

In line with the desire to keep in a dynamic balance the intellectual-doctrinal and spiritual-charismatic approaches as parallel avenues toward theological understanding, comes the precious advice from Gregory of Nazianzus. One of the three famous Cappadocians from the fourth century, Gregory begins his five-part *Theological Orations* with words worth hearing in this introduction to a textbook claiming to present a doctrine of God:

Not to every one, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God; not to every one; the Subject is not so cheap and low; and I will add, not before every audience, nor at all times, nor

on all points; but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits. Not to all men, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are passed masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is, we may safely say, not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun's rays. And what is the permitted occasion? It is when we are free from all external defilement or disturbance, and when that which rules within us is not confused with vexatious or erring images; like persons mixing up good writing with bad, or filth with the sweet odours of unguents. For it is necessary to be truly at leisure to know God; and when we can get a convenient season, to discern the straight road of the things divine. And who are the permitted persons? They to whom the subject is of real concern, and not they who make it a matter of pleasant gossip, like any other thing, after the races, or the theatre, or a concert, or a dinner, or still lower employments. To such men as these, idle jests and pretty contradictions about these subjects are a part of their amusement.⁵

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Notes

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), I/1:301. Likewise, A. W. Argyle notes that God is not specifically “named” in the New Testament; Argyle, *God in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), 9.
2. Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), xv.
3. Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999), 1–2.
4. That challenge is set forth vigorously in Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*. His bold and contested thesis is no less radical than this: “In brief, I argue that the explosion of theological work claiming to recapture the doctrine of the Trinity that we have witnessed in recent decades in fact misunderstands and distorts the traditional doctrine so badly that it is unrecognizable” (xv). While I have benefited from that book’s learned historical discussion, for the sake of the current primary there is no need—nor space—to assess its “newness” and whether its challenge to almost all written in recent decades about trinitarian theology is justified or balanced.
5. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27. The First Theological Oration. A Preliminary Discourse Against the Eunomians, #3*, NPNF² 7:285.