

Trinity

The Christian faith is inalienably trinitarian. Baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” administered by command of the risen Christ ([Matt. 28:18–20](#)), is the ground and seal of a faith that responds to a gospel proclaimed from NT times in embryonically trinitarian terms ([Acts 2:22–38](#)). By the end of the second century the kerygma and the faith were formulated according to a “canon of truth” or “regula fidei” and expressed in early creeds. Thus Irenaeus in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*:

This then is the order of our faith, the foundation of our building, and the support of our conduct: God the Father, uncreated, uncontainable, invisible; one God, the creator of all things: this is the first point of our faith. The second point is this: the Word of God, Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who appeared to the prophets, each characteristically and according to the Father’s ways of disposing; through Christ all things were made, and he also at the end of the times, to complete and gather up all things, was made man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and show forth life and effect communion between God and man. And the third point is: the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, the patriarchs learned the things of God, and the righteous were led into the way of righteousness; and who in the end of the times was poured out in a new way upon the human race, renewing man in all the earth unto God. ([Epid. 6 \[SC 406:90–93, 242\]](#); cf. [Haer. 1.10.1 \[SC 264:154–59\]](#); [4.33.7–8 \[SC 100:818–21\]](#); and Tertullian, [Praescr. 13.1–6 \[SC 46:106\]](#); [Prax. 2 \[in Tertulliani Adversus Praxean liber, ed. E. Evans \(SPCK, 1948\), 90–91, 131–32\]](#))

According to the *Epistula Apostolorum*, Christians profess faith “in the Father, the Ruler of the universe; and in Jesus Christ, our Savior; and in the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete; and in the holy church; and in the forgiveness of sins” (5 [16], in Duensing 7). What we know as the Apostles’ Creed “betrays in its form and language its direct descent from the primitive apostolic Preaching” (Dodd 73–74). In the fourth century, to ward off Arian heresies, the ecumenical councils of 325 and 381 introduced more precise phraseology, drawing transformatively upon Greek ontology to achieve a sharper statement of what was to be taught and believed concerning the being, character, action, and purposes of God. These councils thus produced the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which has remained the most widely affirmed statement of trinitarian faith in both East and West.

The classic creeds were being formulated at the same time as the canon of the

Scriptures was being recognized and determined; there was interaction between the two processes, and the Scriptures and the creeds continue to function reciprocally. In the one direction, the story that the Scriptures tell and the history they record find summary statement in the creeds. In the other direction, the creeds serve as the key to the interpretation of the complex Scriptures. The narrative begins, “In the beginning,” with the creative speech-act of God’s Word and the life-giving energy of God’s Spirit ([Gen. 1:1–2:7](#); cf. [Ps. 33:6–9](#)). The narrative reaches its paradoxical climax when “the Word became flesh” as Jesus Christ ([John 1:14](#)), the “only Son,” who “for our salvation came down from heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man” (Nicene Creed; cf. [Matt. 1:18–23](#); [Luke 1:30–35](#)). On the cross Jesus offered himself to the Father through the eternal Spirit ([Heb. 9:14](#)), and by the same Spirit the Father raised him from the dead ([Rom. 1:4](#); [8:11](#)). The narrative looks forward to a conclusion when “the Spirit and the bride” will cry “Come, Lord Jesus” ([Rev. 22:17, 20](#)), and at his return Christ will inaugurate the definitive kingdom in which God will be praised and enjoyed by God’s people forever. In its preaching and its liturgical rehearsal of the narrative in Scripture readings, creeds, and eucharistic anaphoras, the church invites and enacts the participation of each new generation until the final denouement of the divine drama.

Given the trinitarian faith, traditional Christians see the historical composition of the Scriptures as a trinitarian work. Thus, John Wesley, for instance, in the preface to his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1754–55), gives the following succinct account of the historical origins of the Scriptures:

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote.... The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. (*Works* 14:238)

The God of Israel, who “directed” the patriarchs and “inspired” the prophets, is the holy Trinity, who has now been clearly revealed as such in the incarnation of the Son, the Word made flesh, and in the Holy Spirit. This Spirit was seen to rest upon Jesus and heard to speak through the apostles at Pentecost and beyond. Wesley clearly recognized a human role of various kinds—differing according to historical circumstances—in the

writing down of God's word by Moses and his successors, and by the apostles and evangelists. In his account of that role, Wesley, like much of the Christian tradition, oscillates between the reception of a divine dictation—whereby certain parts of Scripture at least were given to the human writer by “particular revelation”—and the allowance that the writers used their human judgment in a more general accordance with “the divine light which abode with them, the standing treasure of the Spirit of God” (*Explanatory Notes*, ad [1 Cor. 7:25](#)).

The trinitarian origin of the Scriptures is to be matched in our appropriation of them. Correspondingly, traditional Christians go about their reading of the Scriptures in a trinitarian way. This is well expressed in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, drawing on the Vatican II *Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei verbum*). First, “Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written” (*Catechism* §111). Here we may think of the prayer of Hilary of Poitiers. In his work *On the Trinity*, he asks the Father for “participation in the prophetic and apostolic Spirit, so that we may grasp their words in no other sense than (the prophets and apostles) uttered them” (*De trinitate* 1.38 [[CCSL 62:36](#)]). Second, “Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover” (*Catechism* §112; cf. §134). Here we may think of Luther's words concerning Christ himself as the *res* or “substance” of the Scriptures, now clearly revealed. “What more august thing,” he asks Erasmus, “can lie hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken and the stone rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, and that the supreme mystery has gone forth, that Christ the Son of God became a human being, that God is one and triune, that Christ suffered for us and will reign eternally?... Remove Christ from the Scriptures and what more will you find in them?” (*De servo arbitrio* [[WA 18:606](#)]). Third, “In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them” (*Catechism* §104, citing *Dei verbum* §21).

The divine descent is for the purpose of lifting God's human creatures (cf. [2 Cor. 1:18–22](#)). The Scriptures play their part in this upward movement also in trinitarian fashion. Through Christ we have access to the Father in the Spirit ([Eph. 2:18](#); cf. [Rom. 8:14–17](#); [Gal. 4:6](#)). The ultimate consequence of that, as the Cappadocian theologians recognized, is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are properly worshipped and glorified together, “three persons” of “one nature,” “one in essence.” Liturgically, that occurs, for instance, through the acclamation “Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto,” which

concludes the recitation of psalms. It confirms an understanding of the Psalms as a prophetic telling of the entire story of God with the world, as the NT writers imply by their citations from the Psalter at crucial points. This move is endorsed and developed by traditional Christian commentators on the Psalms.

The present “praise of the Lord” as—according to a hymn of Isaac Watts—both our “duty” and our “delight” is a foretaste of our final salvation. Wesley’s sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” is trinitarian through and through. This is true from “the first dawning of grace in the soul” by the “drawings of the Father” ([John 6:44](#)), the “light” of the Son and Word ([John 1:9](#)), and the “convictions” of the Spirit ([John 16:8](#)). It continues through justification on account of the merits of Christ and sanctification by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. And it finds fulfillment in the consummation in glory. “To crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him” (Wesley, Sermon 64, “The New Creation”). The Scriptures are consonant with other elements in the church’s life, particularly preaching and the sacraments, and are norming in appropriate ways these other elements. They are God-given means for the Holy Spirit to bring us to Christ and through him to the Father.

In sum, by their content, their composition, their use, and their functions in worship and proclamation, the Scriptures are thoroughly trinitarian. In the aftermath of the deistic trends of the Enlightenment, twentieth-century Protestant theology was aided toward the recovery of this fundamental fact of the classic Christian faith by Karl Barth’s massively important *Church Dogmatics*. In it the threefold structure of the divine self-revelation—which occurs for us by the Son and in us by the Spirit—corresponds to the very being of the triune God and Lord, to whom the Bible bears permanent and normative witness. In a rich and comprehensive treatment of “Scripture in the economy of salvation,” Telford Work sees the Scriptures at the service of the triune God, who employs them to reveal and achieve his purposes. Each person of the Trinity plays his appropriate part in and through them in the undivided work of salvation. “Christian Scripture reflects and accomplishes the will of the Father, through the ministry of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit and the humanity of God’s chosen people” (11; cf. 319–20).

The traditional trinitarian hermeneutic of Scripture, such as sketched thus far, has

more recently been challenged on two fronts, particularly with regard to the OT. Historical critics bring the charge of anachronism against finding the Trinity in the OT; given the history of European anti-Semitism, there is now also a desire to avoid any supersessionistic account of the continuing Jewish people that would move from the level of theological judgment to that of racial hostility. In face of the first point, C. Kevin Rowe has argued that a genuinely canonical reading of the Bible will respect the sequential unfolding of the external story. Thereby the very newness of the incarnation and Pentecost will exert a “pressure” that gives Christians the clue for a christological and indeed trinitarian understanding of the internal story and its God from its very beginnings. There is no need to read conscious trinitarian thinking “anachronistically” into the minds of the OT authors. In face of the second point, Bruce Marshall realizes that to deny OT Israel access to the triune God would be to saw off the branch on which Christianity sits, since Christians have always claimed that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Nevertheless, he wishes to avoid the dangerous conclusion that the continuing Jewish people do not have such access. That would risk misinterpreting what the apostle Paul says in [Rom. 11:25–32](#) concerning God’s fidelity to his promises and the salvation of “all Israel.” It also might be used to condone the unconscionable behavior of many historic Christians toward Jews over the centuries. Marshall observes that traditional Christian hermeneutics oscillates in its interpretation of “the LORD” in the OT between Christ as the Son or Word, the Father, the Spirit (occasionally), and the entire Trinity. From “the lack of referential fixity in Christian discourse about the God of Israel,” he concludes that “the Father is the God of Israel, the Son is the God of Israel, and the Holy Spirit is the God of Israel, yet they are not three Gods of Israel, but one God of Israel” (258). According to Marshall, “Knowledge of the Trinity, while not necessary in order to identify God, completes and perfects the identification of Israel’s God” (263). “By giving descriptions that enable us to distinguish and relate the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Christian liturgy and Scripture render to us God’s very identity, his inmost personal reality. Themselves instruments of the eternal Spirit, they put us in touch with ‘the deep things of God’ ([1 Cor. 2:10](#))” (263–64).

Augustine recognized the difficulties in a trinitarian distribution of the theophanies of the OT when he systematically explored the relevant passages (*Trin.* 2.7.12–2.18.35 [[CCSL](#) 50:96–126]). In my judgment, there is still a broad wisdom to be found in Augustine’s dictum that “the new testament lies latent in the old, and the old stands revealed in the

new” (*Quaest. Hept.* 2.73 [CCSL 33:106]). This by no means excludes what the Orthodox theologian Boris Bobrinskoy calls “intimations” of the Trinity before the incarnation and Pentecost. Thereby OT saints and prophets may already have glimpsed what was to be more fully revealed of the Godhead later (*John* 5:46; 8:56–58; 12:41; *1 Cor.* 10:4; *1 Pet.* 1:10–12). In Eastern iconography, the scene from *Gen.* 18 depicting the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah under the oaks at Mamre becomes a visual means for offering worship to the triune God rendered present.

Patristically, it is possible to read the increasing clarity of trinitarian revelation in ways that may on the surface seem contradictory but which, in fact, each and together preserve the differentiated unity of the stages in one history of salvation. According to Gregory Nazianzus, “The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely; the New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit; now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself” (*Fifth Theological Oration* 26 [SC 250:326–27]). In the reverse direction, Irenaeus declared that God, “having been seen in bygone days through the Spirit prophetically, and then seen through the Son adoptively, shall be seen in the kingdom of heaven paternally, the Spirit preparing man for the Son of God, the Son leading him to the Father, and the Father giving him the incorruptibility and eternal life that come from the vision of God” (*Haer.* 4.20.5 [SC 100:638–41]). This latter sequence corresponds to what, evangelically and experientially, is already the case as those who are being saved anticipate the “ascent through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father” (5.36.2 [SC 153:458–61]; cf. *Epid.* 7 [SC 406:92–93]). For it is also, according to Basil the Great, the direction of Christian prayer, being the counterpart to the bestowal of divine blessing from the Father through the Son in the Spirit (*On the Holy Spirit* 7 [16]; 16 [37]; 18 [47] [SC 17 bis:298–301, 374–77, 412–15]).

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