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Trinity and the Bible

Carl L. Beckwith

Robert Jenson in 2004 asked the following question: “Is the doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible?”¹ Most Lutherans confidently and without hesitation answer yes. A harder question, one answered with less confidence and slight hesitation, pastors included, is this: *How* is the doctrine of the Trinity taught in the Bible? That question is harder because, as Jenson showed, many biblical scholars regard the Trinity as “an absurd doctrine” that has nothing to do with the Bible.² They contend that the Bible knows nothing of what Nicaea or Chalcedon confessed.³ Donald Juel, for example, longtime professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, asserts, “The New Testament contains no doctrine of the Trinity.” If the Bible contains no doctrine of the Trinity, where did it come from? Juel explains, “Full-blown trinitarian faith is a later, creative interpretation of the biblical witness by the church.”⁴ Juel’s position, shared by too many biblical scholars, both conservative and liberal, frees a person from any trinitarian reading of Scripture and assigns the doctrine to the creativity and Platonic interests of the early church fathers.

Not all biblical scholars think this way. Francis Watson, professor of New Testament at Durham University, laments what he calls the “scholarly anti-trinitarianism” of our day. Most academics, Watson explains, assign the doctrine of the Trinity to church historians and systematic theologians and insist that it is not a serious pursuit for the biblical scholar. Watson continues: “To present a paper on so useful a topic as ‘the doctrine of the Trinity and the Old Testament’ would be regarded as an outrage and a provocation at most gatherings of scholars of the so-

¹ Robert Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible,” *CTQ* 68 (2004): 195.

² Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible,” 196, “Some historicists take the supposed post-biblical status of the doctrine of the Trinity as liberation from what they anyway regard as an absurd doctrine. Others will say things like I used to, that while the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed not in Scripture, it is a proper development from things that are in Scripture—and indeed I might still say this in certain contexts, but have come to see that it is but a small part of the truth.”

³ Robert Jenson, “The Bible and the Trinity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 3 (2002): 329, “The usual supposition is that the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Chalcedonian Christology which follows from it, are not in the Bible, and certainly not in that bulk of the Bible we call the Old Testament.”

⁴ Donald Juel, “The Trinity and the New Testament,” *Theology Today* 54 no. 3 (1997): 313. Despite Juel’s statements and his peculiar use of the word “doctrine,” his article provides good insights on how the New Testament presents the doctrine of the Trinity.

called ‘Hebrew Bible.’” What about the New Testament? Surely that would be a serious scholarly pursuit, right? Watson continues:

In the field of New Testament scholarship, one is expected to distinguish sharply between the nontrinitarian or at best proto-trinitarian conceptuality of the New Testament writings and a later patristic theology whose Platonizing tendencies are said to lead to systematic misreading of the scriptural texts.⁵

Why is it hard for so many Christians to explain *how* the Bible teaches the Trinity? Put simply, they lack resources. Many biblical commentaries in our day discuss the Trinity only when critiquing and dismissing the mistaken trinitarian exegesis and judgments of the church fathers. It is true that church historians and systematic theologians write about the Trinity, but rarely do they write about the exegesis that led the church to confess the indivisible oneness and irreducible threeness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Things were not always like this. Before Augustine wrote his influential work on the Trinity, he read commentaries on the Old and New Testament by his predecessors. Augustine explains:

The purpose of all the Catholic commentators I have been able to read on the divine books of both testaments, who have written before me on the Trinity which God is, has been to teach that *according to the scriptures* Father and Son and Holy Spirit . . . are not three gods but one God.⁶

It is sometimes forgotten how often the church fathers insisted on Scripture alone for their faith in the Trinity.⁷ Didymus the Blind, for example, begins his great work on the Holy Spirit by insisting that only proof-texts (*testimonia*) from the Scriptures will suffice to teach the unity and distinction of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁸ He then proceeds to offer one of the most helpful and detailed readings of Scripture on the Trinity in the early church.⁹ Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa, in his arguments with

⁵ Francis Watson, “Trinity and Community: A Reading of John 17,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1, no. 2 (1999): 168.

⁶ Augustine, *The Trinity* 1.7, trans. Edmund Hill, *Works of Saint Augustine* I/5 (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 69. Hereafter I cite the series as WSA by part and volume number.

⁷ Cf. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.41, in *Corpus Christianorum: Series latina*, 168 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1953–), 32:30 (hereafter CCL): “Faith will stagger, if the authority of the divine scriptures wavers” (*titubabit autem fides, si diuinarum scripturarum uacillat auctoritas*).

⁸ Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit* 2, in *Works on the Spirit*, trans. Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and Lewis Ayres (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 143–144; Didyme l’Aveugle, *Traité du Saint-Esprit*, ed. Louis Doutreleau, *Sources Chrétiennes* 386 (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 144.

⁹ A principal proof-text for the fathers and reformers was the baptism of Christ. Johann Gerhard once quipped, “If you do not believe the Trinity, accompany John to the Jordan and you

those who undermined the divinity of the Holy Spirit, insists that Scripture alone determines what we believe and confess about the Trinity. When opponents undermine our faith in the Trinity, we answer them with the Scriptures. Gregory continues:

We will answer with nothing new, nothing of our own making, to those who summon us to do such things. Rather we will make use of the testimony of the divine scripture concerning the Holy Spirit, through which we have learned that the Holy Spirit is divine and is called so. So then, if they themselves allow this and do not contradict the God-inspired utterances, then let them—so eager for battle with us—explain why they are not fighting against the scripture, but against us. We ourselves say nothing besides what [scripture] says.¹⁰

During the sixteenth century, several Roman Catholic apologists insisted on the necessity of the church's tradition for the doctrine of the Trinity. Johann Eck and Johann Cochlaeus both argued that Scripture only implicitly taught the Trinity and that the authority of the church established it as an article of faith. Luther adamantly rejected this and insisted that the faithful believe the doctrine of the Trinity not because the church tells us to, not because the fathers taught it, but because it is revealed "with the greatest clarity" in both the Old and New Testaments.¹¹

will see it." See Johann Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, Exegesis III, § 81, in *On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 338. This appears to be Gerhard's own paraphrase of a long quotation from Epiphanius as quoted by Martin Chemnitz in his own discussion of the baptism of Christ. Martin Chemnitz, *Harmoniae Evangelicae*, chap. 17 (Geneva: Sumptibus haeredum Iacobi Berjon, 1628), 190. Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 62, 5.1–6.5 (Against Sabellians), in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III De Fide*, trans. Frank Williams, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 126–127.

The troparion for Epiphany used in the Orthodox Church still expresses this conviction. It begins, "When You, O Lord were baptized in the Jordan / the worship of the Trinity was made manifest." Frances Young, in reference to this troparion, writes, "But in scholarly circles no one has imagined for a very long time that such a revelation might have been in the minds of any of the Gospel writers as they told the story of the baptism. The modern consciousness of historical difference has excluded such dogmatic readings." Frances Young, "The Trinity and the New Testament," *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 286.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit* 3, in *Early Christian Writings: On God*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 272; *Adversus Macedonios: De spiritu sancto*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, ed. Werner Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 3.1, 90 (hereafter GNO): ἀλλὰ ἀποχρησόμεθα τῇ τῆς θείας γραφῆς περὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος μαρτυρίᾳ.

¹¹ Georg Major and Johann Faber, *Disputation on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son, and on the Law* (1544), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), vol. 73, 488–489, hereafter AE. Cf. John Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces: Against Luther*

Didymus, Gregory, Augustine, and Luther confessed the Trinity because of their commitment to Scripture; many biblical scholars in our day reject the trinitarian reading of Scripture because of their commitment, such as it is, to Scripture. What does this mean? It means that the fathers and reformers regarded and therefore read the Scriptures differently than many biblical scholars and theologians today. Raymond Brown, one of the most accomplished biblical scholars of the twentieth century, admits this. He regards any valuing of patristic exegesis *as exegesis* a failure. He continues, “I think we must recognize that the exegetical method of the Fathers is irrelevant to the study of the Bible today.”¹² And with that move, the Trinity loses. Let me explain.

If the Nicene confession of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian confession of the two natures and one person of Christ rested on exegesis for the fathers, indeed was only confessed because of how they regarded and read the Scriptures, if that exegesis is no longer relevant, deemed fanciful and misguided, then so too are the results of that exegesis. You cannot have one without the other and still claim to be a biblical theologian. Liberal biblical scholars and theologians do not regard this as a problem. Remember, they think the doctrine of the Trinity absurd. As Gregory of Nazianzus reminds us, false teachers “must have something to blaspheme or life would be unlivable.”¹³ The problem rests with those who continue to confess these doctrines but are unsure how Scripture reveals them and are therefore unable to teach the faithful from Scripture or to defend these doctrines with Scripture. This leads to two further problems. First, we risk reducing the Trinity to an article of faith that proves our orthodoxy but has little to do with our Christian faith and life. Second, when doctrine, any doctrine, is detached from Scripture, it always becomes false doctrine. This is especially a problem for those who take the Scriptures seriously and wish to confess the Trinity according to Scripture. The forgotten exegesis of the church

and Other Enemies of the Church, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 45–47.

¹² R. E. Brown, “The Problems of the *Sensus Plenior*,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 43 no. 3 (1967): 463: “Despite the serious attempt in our times to vindicate the exegesis of the two great exegetical schools of antiquity, Alexandria (Origen) and Antioch (Theodore of Mopsuestia), I would judge the attempt to give great value to patristic exegesis *as exegesis* a failure. I am not saying that the patristic study of Scripture is without importance—far from it, for it is the source of much of our theology. The Church Fathers accomplished a true hermeneutic task: they made the Scripture of an earlier and largely Semitic period speak meaningfully to a later Greco-Roman world. Perhaps at no subsequent period in the history of Catholic Christianity has the Bible been so much the focus of attention as it was in the patristic period. But while appreciating the rich patristic legacy in theology and spirituality drawn from the Bible, I think that we must recognize that the exegetical method of the Fathers is irrelevant to the study of the Bible today.”

¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.2, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 117.

fathers, medieval schoolmen, and Lutheran reformers is too often replaced with an insufficient or false reading of Scripture. The current enthusiasm for the eternal subordination of the Son among conservative evangelicals is a clear and troubling example of this.

The following essay focuses on these two further problems. I begin by showing how the church fathers and Lutheran reformers thought about the Trinity and the Christian life. Here we see that for them the doctrine of the Trinity was no mere article of faith. Part two turns to Scripture. Luther thought the faithful and especially those studying sacred theology needed to know how Scripture teaches the Trinity.¹⁴ Only by knowing this can we detect and refute false and improper statements about the Trinity. I will focus on John 5:19 for the Son and John 16:13 for the Holy Spirit, two especially difficult texts that were consistently read one way by pro-Nicenes, including our Lutheran fathers, but are now read in an anti-Nicene way by conservative evangelicals who teach the eternal subordination of the Son.

Part I: Trinity, Baptism, and the Christian Life

When I teach the Trinity in a conservative, non-Lutheran setting, I begin with a provocative question. I ask my students to imagine for a moment that the doctrine of the Trinity disappeared, that it no longer belonged to orthodox Christianity. I then ask them how this would affect their liturgy or order of worship on a typical Sunday morning and how it would affect their day-to-day lives as Christians. These further questions make some uncomfortable as they realize that very little changes for them. When little or nothing changes, then it would seem the Trinity has been reduced to an article of faith, used when needed to prove our orthodoxy, but otherwise regarded as irrelevant to our Christian identity. When I put these same questions to the fathers and reformers, however, I get a very different response. For them, everything changes, such that nothing recognizably Christian remains. Let me give some examples. I will start with the familiar.

In the Small Catechism, Luther writes: “In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, ‘In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.’” Likewise, “In the evening, when you retire, make the sign of the cross

¹⁴ Luther, *On the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:303–304. Luther also makes this point at the beginning of Georg Major’s disputation on the Trinity in 1544. He notes how the devil always seeks to attack and confuse the articles of faith. The devil had already done this with Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and justification. The same thing was happening with the Trinity. Luther continues, “And so it is expedient for Christians, and especially for those who are studying sacred theology, that they should know how to quench those fiery darts [Eph 6:16]. And as this is a matter set beyond our understanding, it behooves us to be fortified with Sacred Scripture, that we might know how to detect and dismiss slanders and to refute falsehoods because the heretics think that the Holy Scriptures are on their side” (AE 73:473).

and say, ‘In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen’” (SC VII 1, 4).¹⁵ The same sign of the cross, the same divine name and confession of the Trinity placed upon you at Baptism, begins and ends your day. Here, Luther explains, we daily repent and put to death the sins and lusts of the old Adam that the new man would emerge, cleansed and righteous, living forever in God’s presence (SC IV 12). Here we find our life in Christ by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father, daily remembering and participating in the promises and benefits of our Baptism and the saving work of the Trinity.¹⁶

Luther offers a fuller description in the Large Catechism. He describes the Christian life as daily Baptism, as the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man, and insists that this defines our whole life (LC IV 65). This is why, in Baptism, declares Luther, “every Christian has enough to study and practice all his life” (LC IV 41).¹⁷ How do you daily study and practice your Baptism?¹⁸ By first knowing that Baptism is not based on your faith, but that your faith is based and built upon your Baptism.¹⁹ Knowing and confessing this frees you to live confidently and boldly in the certain promises and benefits of Baptism: “victory over death and devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts” (LC IV 41).²⁰ The new man not only reposes in his Baptism but also honors it, embellishing and adorning it with good works.²¹ For Luther, as long as sin, death, and devil oppress you, you have need of your Baptism and the saving work of the Trinity. Here, in Baptism, we rightly know ourselves and the Trinity who saves; here we worship and glorify the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.²² Elsewhere

¹⁵ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 352–353.

¹⁶ Cf. Luther, *Babylonian Captivity* (1520), AE 36:59–60.

¹⁷ Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 441.

¹⁸ Elsewhere Luther expresses this in terms of doctrine and life. We study what Baptism is, what it means for us, and we put it to use, practicing and living in it, throughout our Christian lives. See Martin Luther, *Sermons on Holy Baptism* (1534), in *Martin Luther on Holy Baptism*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2018), 55–59. Hereafter cited as Mayes.

¹⁹ Luther, *Sermons on Holy Baptism* (1534), Mayes, 53: “My being baptized is not my work, nor that of him who gave it to me, for it is not described as mine or the priest’s or any man’s, but Christ my Lord’s Baptism, and neither my cleanness nor yours may add a thing to it. It is not for me or any man to sanctify and cleanse Baptism, but we are all to be sanctified and cleansed by Baptism. Thus I will not base Baptism on my faith, but, on the contrary, my faith will be based and built on Baptism.”

²⁰ Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 441–442.

²¹ Luther, *Sermons on Holy Baptism* (1534), Mayes, 57–59.

²² Cf. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), AE 8:145; WA 44:685.32: “In Baptism the voice of the Trinity is heard.” Luther, *Fifth Sermon on Holy Baptism, On Sexagesima Sunday* (1538), Mayes, 93: “Therefore, whoever wishes to be saved, let him cling to Baptism, in which we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are three persons, the true God, who baptizes us. Man adds nothing to it.” Luther, *Second Sermon on Holy Baptism* (1539), Mayes, 109: “In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,’ that is, in the stead of the whole Trinity.

Luther puts it this way: “I am baptized, instructed with the word alone, absolved, and partake of the Lord’s Supper. But with the word and through the word the Holy Spirit is present, and the whole Trinity works salvation, as the words of baptism declare.”²³ Trinity, Baptism, the Christian life, they all go together for Luther. To talk of one is to talk of the other.

The *Formula of Concord* also emphasizes these points. It states (FC SD II 15–16):

[W]e should thank God from our hearts for having liberated us from the darkness of ignorance and the bondage of sin and death through his Son, and for having regenerated and illuminated us through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.

And after God, through the Holy Spirit in Baptism, has kindled and wrought a beginning of true knowledge of God and faith, we ought to petition him incessantly that by the same Spirit and grace, through daily exercise in reading his Word and putting it into practice, he would preserve faith and his heavenly gifts in us and strengthen us daily until our end.²⁴

Here the Formula, like Luther’s catechisms, construes right understanding of the Trinity with Baptism, and Baptism with the Christian life. It is in the faith of our Baptism, its promises and benefits, that we daily exercise through the reading of the word and in living the Christian life. These insights by Luther and the Formula are especially remarkable when we recall the insignificance of Baptism for the Christian life as taught throughout the medieval and late-medieval period. Although Baptism freed you from the guilt and punishment of original sin, it became of no value once you sinned. As Luther himself recalls, “I was brought up in the error of thinking my Baptism was useless to me.”²⁵ If it is the case that Baptism and Trinity inform each other, as our catechisms and the Formula contend, might it also be the case that an impoverished understanding of Baptism accompanies an impoverished understanding of the Trinity and to impoverish one or the other threatens the purity of the Gospel? Is it only a coincidence, for example, that those teaching the eternal

Then you know that it is God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who is baptizing you; I am only supplying my hands for the purpose and speaking the words. Otherwise it is not my Baptism, but God’s Baptism. Therefore, you are baptized by God, not baptized by me. . . . [T]he Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is our baptizer.”

²³ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), AE 8:264; WA 44:773.4–6.

²⁴ Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 523.

²⁵ Luther, *First Sermon on Holy Baptism* (1539), Mayes, 104. See *Third Sermon on Holy Baptism* (1539), Mayes, 113: “The pope made laws, and my Baptism was forgotten.” For Luther’s description of Rome’s improper understanding of Baptism, see *Sermons on Holy Baptism* (1534), Mayes, 15 and 50–51; *Sermons on Holy Baptism* (1538), Mayes, 63–64, 73, 77–78; and *Babylonian Captivity* (1520), AE 36:57–74.

subordination of the Son in our day also find Baptism insignificant and useless for the Christian life?

There is a further thing to note about the statement from the Formula. Notice how the concordists paraphrased Titus 3. They did not say we are regenerated and renewed but that we are regenerated and *illuminated* through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Their construal of Baptism and illumination highlights an important point of emphasis by Scripture and the fathers. The Bible describes the unregenerated and unrenewed state as darkness and the regenerated and renewed state as light (Eph 5:8; Acts 26:18). Believers alone are those who have been enlightened (Heb 6:4; 10:32), while unbelievers are darkened in their understanding (Eph 4:17–18)—indeed they dwell in a darkness of their own making (Rom 1:21–32; 2 Cor 4:4). Peter tells us that God called us, the faithful, out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9). John says that this light is Jesus (John 8:12), the true light, which enlightens everyone (John 1:9). This enlightenment or illumination, this move from darkness to light, belongs to our new birth, our regeneration by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5–7). For this reason, the church fathers often describe Baptism as illumination, indeed, even substituting one word for the other.²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, writes:

Illumination is the splendor of souls, the conversion of life, the conscience's appeal to God. Illumination is help for our weakness, the renunciation of the flesh, the following of the Spirit, communion with the Word, the improvement of the creature, the destruction of sin, participation in light, the dissolution of darkness. It is the carriage that leads to God, dying with Christ, the perfecting of the mind, the bulwark of faith, the key of the kingdom of heaven, a change of life, the removal of slavery, the loosing of chains, the renewal of our complex being. Why should I go into further detail? Illumination is the greatest and most magnificent of the gifts of God.²⁸

²⁶ FC SD II 15–16 in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 12th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 877: “et per baptismum et spiritum sanctum regeneraverit atque illuminaverit.”

²⁷ Augustine, *Sermon* 135.1 (WSA III/4, 346): “Wash your faces, be baptized, in order to be enlightened and to see, all you who couldn't see before.” Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, trans. Leslie William Barnard (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997), 67: “And this washing is called illumination, as those who learn these things are illuminated in the mind.” See also Cyprian of Carthage, *To Donatus* 4, in *On the Church: Select Treatises*, trans. Allen Brent (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 52–53.

²⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.3, in *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, trans. Christopher Beeley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 108. For the pastoral use of this text, see Johann Gerhard, *Handbook of Consolations*, trans. Carl L. Beckwith (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 29.

Gregory goes on to describe Baptism as a gratuitous gift, undeserved grace, a seal of God's promises (*Or* 40.4). He encourages the faithful, as Luther does, to make use of their Baptism, to practice it. When the devil attacks, Gregory writes, defend yourself with your Baptism (*Or* 40.10). He continues:

Say [to the devil], confident in the seal of baptism, . . . "I have put on Christ, I have been transformed into Christ by baptism. You should worship me." He will depart [from you], I know clearly, defeated and shamed by this, as from Christ the first light, so he will depart from those illumined by him. Such are the gifts of [baptism].²⁹

Baptism, its benefits and promises, informs the whole of the Christian life. It is our defense, our place of refuge, when faced with trial and temptation. It is also our teacher and protector when it comes to faith, worship, and prayer. Gregory of Nyssa writes:

[W]e are baptized as it has been handed down to us, into *Father and Son and Holy Spirit*, and we believe as we are baptized—for it is fitting that our confession be of one voice with our faith—and we give glory as we believe, for it is not natural that worship make war against faith, but as we believe, so also we give glory. Now since our faith is in *Father and Son and Holy Spirit*, faith, worship, and baptism accord with each other.³⁰

We believe, we worship, and we glorify Father, Son, and Holy Spirit according to our Baptism. All of this proceeds for the fathers and reformers from their Christ-centered, trinitarian reading of Scripture. Exegesis produces these sentiments—not creative analogies and certainly not Platonism.

Although the modern way of reading Scripture presents itself as more critical, more advanced, or more sophisticated than premodern readings, it proceeds from theological judgments.³¹ The exegesis of the fathers and reformers also proceeds

²⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.10, in *Festal Orations*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 106–107. For a similar use of Baptism, see Gregory of Nyssa, *Sermon on the Baptism of Christ*, in *Baptism: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, ed. André Hamman (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1967), 136.

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter* 24.8, in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters*, trans. Anna M. Silvas (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 194.

³¹ See Brian Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?: Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," *Communio* 29 (2002): 191: "Modern historical criticism—including the criticism of Biblical texts—is *methodologically* atheistic, even if what it studies is some form or facet of religious belief, and even if it is practiced by believers. Only 'natural,' inner-worldly explanations of why or how things happen, explanations that could be acceptable to believers and unbelievers alike, are taken as historically admissible. So God is not normally understood to count as an actor on the stage of history; God's providence in history, the divine inspiration of Scriptural authors and texts, even the miracles narrated in the Bible, are assumed to be private human

from theological judgments. The issue between modern biblical interpretation and premodern biblical interpretation is not whether we can read the Scriptures apart from theological judgments—we cannot and should not; rather the issue is which theological judgments proceed from Scripture and which stand apart from Scripture. Herein lies one of the notable differences between modern biblical interpretation and patristic interpretation. Modern readings of Scripture are fascinated with method. From the modern perspective, if you get the method right, you get the meaning right. Method guarantees meaning. Method is also transferable. It may be employed by believer and non-believer alike.

The church fathers do not think this way. They are pastors, not academics. They focus on the reader of Scripture, his measure of faith and spiritual maturity, always emphasizing the need for purification.³² Gregory of Nazianzus puts it simply: “Where there is purification there is illumination.”³³ For the fathers, no faith means no understanding. One of Augustine’s favorite verses, cited perhaps more than any other, is Isaiah 7:9 (Vulg.): “Unless you believe, you will not understand” (*nisi credideritis, non intelletis*). No method alone, no matter how carefully and clearly worked out, no matter how attentive to grammar and history, brings a proper understanding of Scripture. Luther thought this too. Proper interpretation requires more than grammar and languages, as indispensable as these are.³⁴ The wise interpreter must know the meaning of Scripture and that meaning centers in Jesus Christ. We focus on the Son, Luther explains, that we might know him and through him the Father and the Holy Spirit. Luther continues: “To him who has the Son Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him.”³⁵

interpretations of events, interior and non-demonstrable, rather than events or historical forces in themselves.”

³² Cf. Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit* 277, in DelCogliano, 227: “If anyone wishes to read this book, we ask he purify himself of every evil work and all wicked thoughts, so that he may be able, once his heart is enlightened, to understand what we have said [about the Trinity].” Augustine begins his *De Trinitate* by saying it is difficult to contemplate God and for this reason our minds must be purified and nursed back to health by the righteousness of faith (*De Trinitate* 1.3–4).

³³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 39.8, in Harrison, 85. There are no shortcuts for Gregory. In an oration on the spiritual immaturity of his opponents, Gregory asks, “Why do you then try to mold other people into holiness overnight, appoint them theologians, and as it were, breathe learning into them, and thus produce ready-made any number of [church] Councils of ignorant intellectuals?” (*Oration* 27.9, in Williams, 32).

³⁴ In a letter to John Lang in 1517, Luther complains that Erasmus knows his grammar and languages but is a lousy theologian: “I see that not everyone is a truly wise Christian just because he knows Greek and Hebrew” (AE 48:39–40). For more on this point, see *Martin Luther’s Basic Exegetical Writings*, ed. Carl L. Beckwith (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), xiii–xiv.

³⁵ Luther, *On the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:339.

Although the fathers and reformers have many things to say about the proper reading and interpretation of Scripture, they focus less on method and more on the reader of Scripture, especially what makes a person a good reader of Scripture. The shift from method to person places Christ at the center of our reading of Scripture, and this sort of reading is only brought about by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. We might say we read as we worship, and we worship in accordance with our Baptism. And if that is true, we can say with Nesteros, one of the desert fathers, that “true knowledge [of the Scriptures] is possessed only by true worshippers of God.”³⁶

Part II: The Forgotten Exegesis of the Church

John 5:19 reads, “Amen, amen, I say to you, the Son can do nothing from himself [ἄφ’ ἑαυτοῦ] except what he sees the Father doing. For whatever he does, these things [ταῦτα] the Son does in like manner [ὁμοίως].”³⁷ This verse appears with regularity in the trinitarian debates only after the explicitly anti-Nicene council of Sirmium in 357. The bishops at Sirmium produced a statement of faith that condemned all substance words on scriptural grounds, specifically *homoousios* (“of the same substance”) and *homoiousios* (“of like substance”).³⁸ The Son’s birth or generation, which they repeatedly state is beyond understanding, conveys for them the Son’s subordination to the Father, who is greater in honor, dignity, glory, and majesty.³⁹

Responses to the Sirmium manifesto came from both pro-Nicenes and anti-Nicenes. Basil of Ancyra and George of Laodicea, who embraced the term *homoiousios* but rejected *homoousios*, used John 5:19 to show the *likeness* of Father and Son according to substance or being.⁴⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, a committed Nicene

³⁶ John Cassian, *Collationes* 14.16, in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, n.d.), 13:418: “etenim uera scientia non nisi a ueris dei cultoribus possidetur.”

³⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

³⁸ Hilary wrote his *De Synodis* against the *blasfemia* of Sirmium and the *blasfemantes* there gathered. See *De Synodis* 10 and 70, in *Patrologia cursus completus: Series latina*, 217 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844–1864), 10:487 and 527 (hereafter PL). For a translation of the creed and discussion of it, see R. P. C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 343–347.

³⁹ The language of Sirmium 357 appears again in the surviving fragments from Palladius of Ratiaria, a Latin Homoian opposed by Ambrose of Milan and condemned at Aquileia in 381. See Palladius, *Apologia* 347v in Roger Gryson, *Scolies ariennes sur le concile d’Aquilée*, Sources Chrétiennes 267 (Paris: Cerf, 1980), 318. See also the anonymous *Sermo Arrianorum*, preserved by Augustine, and his debate with Maximinus the Arian in Hippo around 426/427. Both texts are in *Arianism and Other Heresies*, WSA I/18. I discuss these texts below.

⁴⁰ Basil convened the synod of Ancyra before Easter 358 in response to the Sirmium manifesto and to George’s report of an emerging alliance between the Homoians and the Heterousian

theologian, also responded and used John 5:19 to show the equality and inseparability of Father and Son and their unity of nature and power. According to Hilary, his Arian opponents understood John 5:19 to grant a likeness of power (*virtus*) but to deny a likeness of nature (*natura*).⁴¹ Hilary regards the distinction between nature and power as philosophically confused and scripturally wrong. He contends that we know the truth of something, what it is, “from its nature and power.”⁴² Power is intrinsic to nature such that power exhibits the sort of nature a thing is by the things it does or the works it produces. When John 5:19 says that Father and Son do the same works in like manner, it indicates for Hilary that they have the same power by which they do the same works and therefore they possess the same undifferentiated divine substance.⁴³

Hilary’s correlation of nature and power is a significant point of emphasis for pro-Nicene theologians and informs a key exegetical insight used throughout the church’s tradition.⁴⁴ Pro-Nicene writers observed how questions of identity arose when Jesus did things belonging either to God alone or at the very least to some being greater than a mere man. When Jesus forgave the sins of the woman with the alabaster jar, those who witnessed this began to say among themselves, “*Who* is this, who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49). When he forgave the sins of the paralytic, the scribes declared in their hearts, “He is blaspheming! *Who* can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). When he rebuked the wind and calmed the sea, the disciples, filled with fear, said to one another, “*Who* then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41, emphases added). Jesus’ actions, his activities or works, raised questions of identity for those around him. The fathers pursued this insight, gleaned from Scripture, to argue that if Jesus did things belonging only to God, like

interests of Aetius. Basil wrote a synodal letter with anathemas, which Epiphanius preserves in his *Panarion*. This letter constitutes the earliest statement of what scholars refer to as Homoiousian theology. George wrote a letter in 359 following the drafting of the so-called Dated Creed, which Basil signed. Epiphanius produces the letter attributed to George immediately after Basil’s synodal letter. For the references to John 5:19 in these two letters, see Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.8.4, 73.9.5, 73.11.2 (Basil) and 73.18.2–8 (George) in *Epiphanius III: Panarion haer. 65–80. De fide*, ed. Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer, *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* 37 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985), 278, 280, 282, 290–291. Hereafter GCS.

⁴¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Synodis* 19 (PL 10:495); cf. *De Synodis* 75 (PL 10:529).

⁴² Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 5.3 (Sources chrétiennes 448:102). See *De Trinitate* 9.52 (Sources chrétiennes 462:124) for Hilary’s sequence of nature, power, and operation. Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* 2.32, in *Fathers of the Church*, trans. Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 180: “If power and substance are the same thing, then that which characterizes the power will also completely characterize the substance.”

⁴³ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Synodis* 19 (PL 10:495). Cf. Hilary, *De Trinitate* 7.15.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 7.26–27; Didymus the Blind, *De Spiritu Sancto* 74–109.

forgiving sins or exercising power over nature, then he must be God. They used the same insights for the Holy Spirit.

The correlation of activity and identity stands at the heart of pro-Nicene trinitarian exegesis and its medieval and Reformation reception. Gregory of Nyssa states this succinctly: “If we perceive that the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, differing or varying in no respect whatsoever, we must deduce the oneness of their nature from the identity of their work.”⁴⁵ Oneness of work or activity indicates oneness of nature. Didymus the Blind writes, “Those who have a single activity also have a single substance. For the things of the same substance—ὁμοούσια—have the same activities, and things of a different substance—ἕτεροούσια—have discordant and distinct activities.”⁴⁶ By observing how Scripture assigns certain works to God alone (so-called divine prerogatives) and further ascribes these unique works to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Nicene theologians showed how Scripture dogmatically teaches the indivisible and undifferentiated nature and power of the divine persons.

This pro-Nicene insight informs medieval and Reformation trinitarian exegesis. Thomas Aquinas, for example, writes, “the clearest indication of the nature [*natura*] of a thing is taken from its works [*ex operibus eius*]” because “different work [*alietas operationis*] indicates different nature [*alietatem naturae*].”⁴⁷ Luther uses the same exegetical insight. He writes,

Christ gives grace and peace, not as the apostles did, by preaching the Gospel, but as its Author and Creator. The Father creates and gives life, grace, peace, etc.; the Son creates and gives the very same things. To give grace, peace, eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, justification, life, and deliverance from death and the devil—these are the works, not of any creature but only of the Divine Majesty. The angels can neither create these things nor grant them. Therefore these works [*opera*] belong only to the glory of the sovereign Majesty, the Maker of all things. And since Paul attributes to Christ [the same and equal power with the Father (*eandem et aequalem cum Patre potestatem*)] to create and give all this, it follows that he] is truly God by nature [*sequitur eum esse vero et natura Deum*].⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Eustathium* 6e, Silvas, 241, rendering ἐνέργεια as “work” rather than “operation.”

⁴⁶ Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit* 81 (DelCogliano, 168).

⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1466 and 1912, trans. Fabian Larcher (Lander, Wyo.: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 2:70, 250, translation altered. See also *op. cit.* 1:171.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), AE 26:31; WA 40/1.80b.25–81b.22, translation slightly altered in bracketed section. For more examples from Luther, see *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical*

Where did the fathers, schoolmen, and Reformers get this idea? Was this part of their misleading, creative exegesis? Did it come from Plato? No, once again, it was Jesus. In John 10, Jesus tells his opponents that the works [τὰ ἔργα / *opera*] he does bear witness about him (John 10:25). Jesus' opponents are mad because he referred to himself as the Son of God. Jesus continues, "If I am not doing the works [τὰ ἔργα / *opera*] of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works [τοῖς ἔργοις / *operibus*], that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:37–38). Similarly, when John the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus, asking if he is the one, Jesus answers by pointing to his works: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matt 11:4–5). He points to his works, to what he does, to indicate who he is, as foretold in Isaiah 35 and 61.

Basil of Ancyra and George of Laodicea stand between the strong subordinationist position of the Arians gathered at Sirmium in 357 and Hilary's pro-Nicene insistence on the undifferentiated nature and power of Father and Son and therefore the correlation of activity and identity as seen above with Gregory of Nyssa, Didymus the Blind, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther. Basil and George differentiate Father and Son in terms of power. They contend that the Father acts with supreme authority (ἀυθεντικῶς) and the Son subordinately (ὑπορυγικῶς), and this indicates for them likeness rather than sameness of nature and power—hence *homoiousios* rather than *homoousios*.⁴⁹ Basil and George argue that the Son is the true Son of God, *like* the Father in divinity and activities, but this likeness retains difference and subordination. Basil and his colleagues therefore reject Nicaea's *homoousios* because it obscures the difference between the Father and the Son in authority (ἐξουσία) and therefore essence or divinity.⁵⁰ This anti-Nicene position, as we will see shortly, finds support in the *ESV Study Bible*. Before I turn to that, let me briefly sketch the interpretation of John 5:19 from Augustine to our Lutheran dogmaticians to show the remarkably consistent pro-Nicene reading of this verse and its use to interpret other difficult verses in the Gospel of John on the Holy Spirit.

Writings, 217–218 (Lectures on Galatians); 367–368, 371 (Sermons on Gospel of John); and 431–432, 444–445, 460 (Last Words of David).

⁴⁹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.9.5 (Basil of Ancyra) and 73.18.4–5 (George), in GCS 37:279–280 and 37:290–291.

⁵⁰ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.11.9–10; GCS 37:283–284. Cyril rejects the position taken by Basil. In a lengthy discussion of the common works of the Father and the Son, Cyril denounces the use of ὑπορυγικῶς for the Son and insists on the equal ἐξουσία of the Father and the Son. See Cyril of Alexandria, *De sancta Trinitate dialogi*, *Dialogus* 5 (Sources chrétiennes 237:334, 336): ἐνεργὸν ἐπ' ἀμφοῖν οὐχ ὑπορυγικῶς ἀλλ' ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ τῇ θεοπρεπεί κατοψόμεθα τὸν Υἱόν.

From Augustine to the Lutheran Reformers

Augustine's mature explanation of John 5:19 appears in *Tractate* 20 from his commentary on the Gospel of John.⁵¹ He begins, as Hilary did, by stating that the Son's equality rests in his eternal generation and personal relation to the Father. The Father begets the Son; the Father is not from the Son but the Son is from the Father.⁵² Therefore, when the Son says he can do nothing from himself (*a se*), he indicates that he works *as he is* and he always is in relation to the Father.⁵³ Augustine explains:

Since the Son's power (*potentia*) is from the Father, therefore the Son's substance (*substantia*) is from the Father; and since the Son's substance is from the Father, therefore the Son's power is from the Father. In the case of the Son, power is not one thing and substance another, but power is the same thing that substance is—*substantia* that he is (*ut sit*) and *potentia* that he is able to do (*ut possit*). Therefore, since the Son is "from the Father," for this reason he said, "The Son is not able to do anything from himself" (*a se*). Since the Son is not "from himself" (*a se*), he is not able to do "from himself" (*a se*).⁵⁴

When Scripture declares that the Father makes all things through the Son, it reveals for Augustine the inseparable working of the Father and the Son as they are, which means according to mode of origin and the ordering of the divine life.⁵⁵ With this in mind, the careful reader of Scripture will understand John 5:19 to mean the Son does nothing *from himself* because the Son is not *from himself*. Augustine uses these same insights for the Holy Spirit. John 16:13 states that the Spirit will speak nothing from himself. For Augustine, the Spirit does not speak from himself because he is not from himself.⁵⁶ He speaks *as he is*, and he is from the Father and the Son. These

⁵¹ Cf. Carl L. Beckwith, "Augustine's Mature Understanding of John 5.19 and the Doctrine of Inseparable Operations," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 73 (2022), 195–232.

⁵² Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 20.4 (CCSL 36:205).

⁵³ Cf. Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 39.4 (CCSL 36:346). Father and Son are always said *ad aliquid* ("with respect to something"). Augustine explains, "Truly God the Father is Father *ad aliquid*, that is, to the Son; and God the Son is Son *ad aliquid*, that is, to the Father."

⁵⁴ Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 20.4 (CCSL 36:205).

⁵⁵ Cf. Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum*, I, 9 (Wittenberg: Johannis Ludolphi Quenstedii, 1691), 327, thesis 17: "The real distinction of the divine persons arises from their order, both in subsistence and in activity. And yet we must distinguish between order of nature, order of time, order of dignity, and order of origin and relation. We ascribe no order of nature to the divine persons because they are *homoousios*, of the same nature and essence. Nor do we ascribe an order of time because they are consubstantial and coeternal, nor an order of dignity because they are of the same honor. But we do ascribe to them an order of origin and relation because the Father is from no one, the Son is from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is from both."

⁵⁶ Augustine's concise language derives from Didymus the Blind. See Carl L. Beckwith, "Augustine's Use of Didymus the Blind on John 5:19," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 31 (2023), forthcoming.

seemingly ordinary expressions from Scripture convey for Augustine the mode of origin and eternal relation of the divine persons.⁵⁷ More importantly, these phrases pattern the speech of the faithful to confess, according to Scripture, the indivisible oneness and irreducible threeness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who work inseparably according to their indivisible nature, power, and will.⁵⁸

Thomas Aquinas repeats these insights from Augustine. John 5:19 and 16:13 show for him that mode of origin and the distinguishing characteristics of the divine persons inform their works. The Son does nothing from himself because he is not from himself. He acts as he is. As the Son's being is from the Father, so too his power is from the Father—a statement taken from Augustine's *Tractate* 20.⁵⁹ Thomas writes, "Just as the *Son does not act from himself* but from the Father, so the Holy Spirit, because he is from another, that is, from the Father and the Son, *will not speak from himself.*"⁶⁰ For Thomas, the Son acts as he is, as the one eternally begotten from the Father; the Spirit speaks as he is, as the one eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Our Lutheran fathers repeat these pro-Nicene insights on John 5:19 and 16:13.⁶¹ Johann Brenz, co-worker with Luther, and Aegidius Hunnius, signer of the Formula of Concord, summarize the Augustinian reading of John 5:19 in their respective commentaries on John. Brenz begins by restating the pro-Nicene exegetical insight that common works indicate common essence, power, and will.⁶² He further insists, as Augustine and Thomas before him, that the divine persons work as they are. He writes, "Whatever the Father does, he does through the Son,

⁵⁷ Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* (CCSL 99.1–5) and *De Trinitate* 2.5 (CCSL 50:85–86).

⁵⁸ Cf. Ambrose, *De Fide* 4.7.74, in *Ambrosius von Mailand: De Fide*, ed. Christoph Marksches, *Fontes Christiani*, 3 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 2:514. After quoting John 5:19, Ambrose writes, "There is in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, through the unity of the same substance, as we say, the same will and power both to do and not to do."

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 749 (Larcher, 1:281): "*The Son cannot do anything from himself*, for the Son's power is the same as his nature. Therefore the Son has his *posse* from the one he has his *esse*; and he has his *esse* from the Father (John 16:28)" (my translation). Thomas's comment paraphrases Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 20.4 (CCSL 36:205).

⁶⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 2103 (Larcher, 2:328–329).

⁶¹ For another example of how our Lutheran fathers receive and clarify the insights of the church fathers and Thomas Aquinas, see Carl L. Beckwith, "Wordy Dogmaticians and Endless Distinctions: Early Modern Lutheran Christology," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 62 (2002): 31–51.

⁶² Johannes Brenz, *In D. Johannis Evangelion* (Hagenau: Johann Setzer, 1529), 85r–85v: "Sed Deum ita patrem suum esse dixit, quod omnia sua opera, Dei patris sint opera: hoc est, quod eiusdem sint essentiae, potentiae, gloriae: adeoque plane unus Deus. . . . Non potest, inquit, filius a se quicquam facere [John 5:19]: hoc est, patris & filii eadem est potestas, eadem voluntas, eadem operatio: patris & filii opera communia sunt."

who is the Word. Whatever the Son does, he does from the Father.”⁶³ The Father works as the Father of the Son and therefore always through the Son; the Son works as the Son of the Father and therefore always from the Father.

Similarly, Aegidius Hunnius insists that the Father and the Son work inseparably because of their indivisible essence and power. To separate the working of the Father and Son would be to divide their common *ousia* and *potentia*.⁶⁴ Why, then, asks Hunnius, does John 5:19 say the Son can do nothing from himself? Although some sixteenth-century Lutherans read this verse according to the economy, the logic of this text, as shown by the pro-Nicene tradition, deals with theology and the eternal relation of Father and Son.⁶⁵ Hunnius insists on this point. The Father is the principle of origin; he is from no one. The Son is begotten of the Father and receives his divine majesty and all that he is through eternal generation. Does this make the Son less than the Father? Hunnius says no. The Son is God as the Father is God—this indicates their unique and indivisible oneness—and the Son is eternally from the Father—this indicates their unique and irreducible relation.⁶⁶

These pro-Nicene insights are repeated by the seventeenth-century dogmaticians. Johann Andreas Quenstedt, the so-called “bookkeeper of Lutheran orthodoxy,”⁶⁷ summarizes, in his typical and remarkable way, Augustine and the best insights of the Latin tradition on John 5:19 and 16:13. The works of the Trinity toward creation are one and accord with the order and personal properties of the divine persons. Quenstedt explains, “Since the Father has his essence from himself, he acts from himself, the Son acts and works from the Father, and the Holy Spirit

⁶³ Johannes Brenz, *In D. Iohannis Evangelion*, 85v–86r: “Quicquid enim pater facit, per filium, qui est Verbum, facit. Quicquid filius facit, a patre facit.”

⁶⁴ Aegidius Hunnius, *Commentarius in Evangelium de Iesu Christo, secundum Ioannem*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Johann Spies, 1595), 226.

⁶⁵ For two examples, see the doctoral disputations of Theodor Fabricius (AE 73:447) and Georg Major (AE 73:496). John Calvin also reads this verse according to the economy.

⁶⁶ Aegidius Hunnius, *Commentarius in Ioannem*, 227: “Si vero ad Christum, qua Deus est, haec determinatio referatur, sicut ratio consecutioque textus arguit: tum sciendum, hisce respici ad principatum originis, qui penes Patrem residet. Solus enim Pater a nullo est, sed a semetipso. Filius vero a Patre est genitus, & per hanc generationem aeternam Pater omnem suam Maiestatem divinitatis ei communicavit essentialiter. Quamvis ergo Filius non minus est verus Deus, quam Pater, & proinde ratione essentiae divinitatis & maiestatis (quae una est omnium trium personarum) nulla differentia inter Filium & Patrem, quandoquidem non alia, sed eadem divinitate Filius, Deus est, qua Pater est Deus, eodemque cultu & honore ab Angelis & hominibus adoratur: tamen ratione originis tribuitur Patri hic primatus & praerogativa hypostatica, quod ipse a nullo est, Filius vero a Patre est. Ita haec determinatio nihil derogat divinitati Filii, sed tantum personalem quandam originis principatum notat, interim essentialem unitatem aequalitatemque non tollens aut convellens.”

⁶⁷ Isaac Dorner, *Geschichte der protestantischen Theologie* (Munich: J. G. Cotta, 1867), 530; Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology*, trans. George Robson and Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871), 2:109.

acts and works from both.”⁶⁸ Quenstedt then quotes John 5:19 and uses the verse to show that mode of origin informs the inseparable and undivided works of the Trinity. He writes, “The Son, just as he is not from himself, but has his essence from the Father by eternal generation, so also he has not the power of working from himself nor does he act from himself, but from the Father.” What about the Holy Spirit? Quenstedt, as a good pro-Nicene, appeals to John 16:13. He continues, “In the same sense, as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, he does not speak from himself, but those things, which are of Christ, he receives and announces, as it is said in John 16:13.”⁶⁹ For Quenstedt, John 5:19 and 16:13 show that the Son works as he is, as the one from the Father, and the Holy Spirit works as he is, as the one from the Father and the Son.⁷⁰

Anti-Nicenes and Modern Evangelicals

The pro-Nicene reading of John 5:19 and 16:13 has been abandoned by some evangelicals in our day. These writers adopt an anti-Nicene exegesis for these verses to teach the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. Indeed, it is remarkable how similar the exegesis and preferred patterns of speech are between these modern evangelicals and the anti-Nicenes of the early church. The clearest anti-Nicene statement on John 5:19 and 16:13 from the early church appears in an anonymous Arian sermon (*Sermo Arrianorum*) that dates to the late fourth or early fifth century. The sermon begins with a creedal summary insisting that the Son creates and redeems “at the will and command of

⁶⁸ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, I, 9 (p. 328, thesis 21): “Addenda tamen regulae Augustinianae haec clausula; *Servato ordine & discrimine personarum*, quia enim Pater a seipso essentialiter habet, ideo etiam a se agit, Filius a Patre, & Spiritus S. ab utroque agit & operatur, Ioh. V. 19. *Non potest Filius a se facere quicquam, nisi quod viderit Patrem facientem. Quaecunque enim ille fecerit, haec itidem & Filius facit.*” For further discussion of the Lutheran addendum to Augustine’s rule, see Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 3* (Fort Wayne: Luther Academy, 2016), 328–334.

⁶⁹ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, I, 9 (p. 328, thesis 21): “Filius, sicut non a seipso, sed a Patre per aeternam generationem essentialiter suam habet, sic quoque a seipso operandi potentiam non habeat, aut a seipso agat, sed a Patre. Eodem plane sensu, quo Spiritus S. propter suam a filio processionem, non a seipso loqui, sed de illis, quae Christi sunt, *accipere & annunciare* dicitur Ioh. XVI. 13.”

⁷⁰ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, I, 9 (p. 328, thesis 21): “A seipso ergo non facit filius, ut Pater, cum non a seipso sit, sed a Patre, a quo ut essentialiter ita quoque omnipotentiam habet. Paucis; ἀδύνατον, impossibile est, ut Filius quicquam faciat, quod non viderit facientem Patrem, ob ὁμοουσίαν Filii cum Patre & originem Filii a Patre.” Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, I, 10 (p. 416, thesis 7): “Ut ut enim actio ipsa essentialis sit & agendi principium etiam unum & idem, modus tamen & ordo agendi distinctus est, pro distincta ratione ea, qua tres personae principium istud seu essentialiter divinam habent. Qui enim Pater a se essentialiter habet, ideo etiam a se agit. Filius autem a Patre agit & operatur & Spiritus S. a Patre & Filio. Pater operatur per Filium & Spiritum Sancti. sed non contra.”

the Father,” a phrase repeated throughout the sermon’s opening section to underscore the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father (1–9). The second section presents several theses that concisely state the distinction and difference of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who differ in nature, power, and work (10–31). Here the author uses John 5:19 and 16:13 to teach the subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Son. After stating that the Son is subject to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Son, the author writes, “*The Son can do nothing from himself* [John 5:19] but awaits a sign from the Father for every detail. *The Spirit does not speak on his own* [John 16:13] but awaits the Son’s command for everything.”⁷¹ The final section of the sermon condemns the Nicene faith and any use of *homoousios* (32–34). The author concludes that Scripture shows the Father commands the Son and the Son obeys. This indicates that the Son stands beneath the Father and in subjection to him (34). The Son’s obedience and subjection does not belong to the assumption of flesh, to the economy, but is true of the Son before the incarnation, to theology proper (34).

Modern proponents of the eternal subordination of the Son repeat these sentiments.⁷² Bruce Ware, professor of systematic theology at the Southern Baptist Theological seminary, argues that “an authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. . . . The Father possesses the place of supreme authority [T]he Son submits to the Father just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit

⁷¹ *Sermo Arrianorum* 20 (WSA I/18, 135; CCSL 87a:167). Augustine preserves this work at the beginning of his refutation of it. See *The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon in Arianism and Other Heresies* (WSA I/18, 133–171).

⁷² Modern proponents of the Son’s eternal subordination also appeal to 1 Corinthians 11:3 and 15:28. See, for example, the *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane Dennis and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), 2206 and 2214. Likewise, Maximinus the Arian, whom Augustine debated in Hippo around 427, and Palladius of Ratiaria, a Latin Homoian condemned at the council of Aquileia (381), use these verses to teach the Son’s eternal subordination. For Maximinus, see *Conlatio cum Maximino* 10 (CCSL 87a:392–393; WSA I/18, 192); for Palladius, see *Gesta Episcoporum Aquileia Adversum Haereticos Arrianos* 39 (Roger Gryson, *Scolies ariennes sûr le concile a’Aquilée*, 358). For the pro-Nicene understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:3, see Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* 4.3.28–33, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952–1957), 10:265–266 (hereafter *NPNF2*); Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.10 (WSA I/5, 212); and Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, Exegesis II, § 195, in *On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, 191. For the pro-Nicene understanding of 1 Corinthians 15:28, see Ambrose of Milan, *On the Christian Faith* 5.13.153–15.187 (*NPNF2* 10:303–308); Augustine, “Question 69: On the meaning of 1 Cor 15:28,” in *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions* (WSA I/12, 121–128); and Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15* (1534), AE 28:124–126, 141. See also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 2:390–391.

submits to both the Father and the Son.”⁷³ John Starke, co-editor with Ware for a book on the eternal subordination of the Son, uses John 5:19 to show the Son’s subordinate working. He writes, “The Father initiates, and the Son obediently responds, since the Son does only what he sees his Father doing, and the power to do it comes from his Father (John 5:19).”⁷⁴ Ware and Starke’s preferred language for the Trinity echoes not only the language of the Arian sermon but also the anti-Nicene position of Basil of Ancyra and George of Laodicea. As noted above, they argue that the Father acts with supreme authority (*αὐθεντικῶς*) and the Son acts subordinately (*ὑπουργικῶς*).⁷⁵ Palladius of Ratiaria, an Arian opponent of Ambrose of Milan, similarly argued that the Father alone possesses “a unique and supreme authority” (*unica ac summa auctoritate*) and that the Son does only what the supreme authority of his Father commands him to do.⁷⁶

This anti-Nicene language and these theological concerns regrettably appear in the ESV and *ESV Study Bible*. Recall that Basil of Ancyra rejected Nicaea’s *homoousios*, in part, because it obscures the difference between the Father and the Son in terms of authority (*ἐξουσία*) and therefore essence or divinity.⁷⁷ The ESV shares this anti-Nicene concern and overcomes it by adding the word “authority” to several verses in the Gospel of John.⁷⁸ For example, according to the Greek, Jesus says in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit “will not speak from himself” [*οὐ γὰρ λαλήσει ἄφ’ ἑαυτοῦ*]; the ESV, on the other hand, states that the Holy Spirit “will not speak on his own *authority*.” Similarly, Jesus states in John 12:49, according to the Greek, “For I have not spoken from myself [*ὅτι ἐγὼ ἐξ ἑμαυτοῦ οὐκ ἐλάλησα*], but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment, what I should say, and

⁷³ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 21.

⁷⁴ John Starke, “Augustine and His Interpreters,” in *One God in Three Persons*, ed. Bruce Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 169–170. Augustine explicitly rejects the idea of the Father initiating a work that the Son completes. See Augustine, *Sermon 135.3* (WSA III/4, 347): “These people [the Latin Homoians] who don’t understand and walk around with eyes still unopened, they are in the habit of saying, ‘The Father did it by giving the order, the Son by carrying it out.’” See further *Sermon 126.9* and *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus 20.7* and 20.9. It is difficult to understand how the Father initiating an act that the Son obediently responds to avoids positing an interval or delay between the willing of the Father and the Son. Pro-Nicenes reject this idea. See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Ablabium* (GNO 3.1; 49.6–7, and 51.19–20). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work “jointly, inseparably, and mutually,” and this means there is no delay or interval “in the movement of the divine will from the Father through the Son and to the Holy Spirit.”

⁷⁵ Epiphanius, *Panarion 73.9.5* (Basil) and 73.18.4–5 (George); GCS 37:279–280 and 37:290–291.

⁷⁶ Palladius, *Apologia 346r* (Gryson, *Scolies*, 312).

⁷⁷ See note 50.

⁷⁸ On the use of *ἐξουσία* in the Gospel of John, see William Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 162.

what I should speak.” The ESV, however, has Jesus say, “For I have not spoken on my own *authority*, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.” Why add the word “authority” to these verses? The answer is found in the *ESV Study Bible*. It explains: “*Not . . . on my own authority* indicates again that the supreme authority in the Trinity belongs to the Father, and delegated authority to the Son, though they are equal in deity.”⁷⁹ Note the insistence on supreme authority. This was the phrase used by Palladius, Basil of Ancyra, and George of Laodicea to distinguish the Father and the Son.

For Basil of Ancyra and those who agreed with him, their understanding of the Father’s supreme authority and the Son’s eternal subordination entailed the rejection of Nicaea’s *homoousios*. Hilary of Poitiers agreed. To teach the Son’s eternal subordination rejected the faith of Nicaea. Bruce Ware does not agree. He writes, “To deny *homoousios* and the full deity of the Son is unthinkable for those who advance this position [the eternal subordination of the Son]. So the charge that our position entails its denial is weighty, serious, and grave, but a charge that we reject altogether.”⁸⁰ Basil and his colleagues thought the two positions incompatible. Hilary and the pro-Nicenes thought the two positions incompatible. Bruce Ware does not. From a historical perspective, Ware’s position is partly Nicene and partly anti-Nicene. He uses Nicene words with anti-Nicene meanings. Our dear Martin Luther warned us about this sort of thing when he said that “error lies in meaning not words.”⁸¹

Conclusion

Does the Bible teach the Trinity? Yes. How do we know this? By meditating upon the Scriptures with the faithful who have gone before us, by remembering with gratitude the history of God’s church and our identity and place in that history—in short, by studying and practicing our Baptism. Basil of Caesarea writes:

As we are baptized, so also do we believe; as we believe, so also do we sing the doxology. Since, then, baptism has been given to us by our Savior in the name

⁷⁹ *ESV Study Bible*, 2050. This teaching appears throughout the *ESV Study Bible*. See also the notes for John 3:35; 5:19; 14:28; Matthew 28:18; Mark 10:40; Acts 2:33; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28; Ephesians 1:4.

⁸⁰ Bruce Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?” in *One God in Three Persons*, 248.

⁸¹ Luther, *Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ* (1540), AE 73:269; Luther, *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (1540), WA 39/2:109a.21–22. Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 2.3 (Sources chrétiennes 443:278): “Heresy arises from the understanding not from scripture; the explanation, not the text, is to blame.” Faustinus, *De Trinitate* 1.1 (PL 13:38): “The Arian impiety, when called upon to confess the divine faith, asserts many things with the same words as we use but not with the same sense.”

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we offer the confession of our faith in accordance with our baptism, and in accordance with our faith we also sing the doxology, glorifying the Holy Spirit along with the Father and the Son.⁸²

My friends, practice your Baptism, and as you do, meditate upon the Scriptures and delight in the faithful labors of the fathers and reformers. Confess and teach that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work inseparably as they are according to their indivisible nature, power, and will. Confess and teach that there is no supreme authority or delegated authority, no eternal subordination, no superiority or inferiority in the divine being of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Take your stand with Gregory of Nazianzus, who, speaking to those awaiting Baptism, entrusts to them the confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He continues:

This I give you as a companion and protector for all your life, the one divinity and power, found in unity in the three, and gathering together the three as distinct; neither uneven in essences or natures, nor increased or decreased by superiorities or inferiorities; from every perspective equal, from every perspective the same. . . . Each God when considered in himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Spirit; each preserving his properties.⁸³

May we with Gregory and all the faithful claim this confession as our companion and protector throughout our lives.

⁸² Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 159, in *Loeb Classical Library*, trans. Roy Deferrari (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 2:395–397, translation slightly altered. For similar language, see also Basil, *Ep.* 91, 125, and 210.

⁸³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.41 (Harrison, 136–137; SC 358:292): “οὔτε ἀνώμαλον οὐσίαις ἢ φύσει οὔτε δὲ αὐξομένην ἢ μειομένην ὑπερβολαῖς καὶ ὑφέσει, πάντοθεν ἴσην.” Cf. Gregory, *Oration* 31.9 (Wickham, 123; Sources chrétiennes 250:392–393): “No, the language here gives no grounds for any deficiency, for any subordination in being [Ἄλλ’ οὐκ ἐλλείψεως ταῦτά ποθεν, οὐδὲ τῆς κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑφέσεως]. The very facts of not being begotten, of being begotten, and of proceeding, give them whatever names are applied to them—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively.”