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The Biblical Trinitarian Narrative: Reflections on Retrieval

Dean O. Wenthe

A recent observation might set the stage for our reflections upon the trinitarian narrative of sacred Scripture. One student of the Trinity observes:

Today, a trinitarian theology of God is something of an anomaly. Even though at one time the question of the Trinity was at the center of a vital debate, Christianity and Christian theology seem to have functioned quite well, for several centuries, with a doctrine of the Trinity relegated to the margins. Not until very recently has this fundamental area of Christian theology begun to attract renewed interest. If a genuine revitalization of the Christian doctrine of God is to succeed, it is critical to understand the factors that contributed to the current situation: a doctrine of the Trinity that most consent to in theory but have little need for in the practice of Christian faith.¹

Could this be an accurate description of Missouri Synod piety, namely, that many "consent to a doctrine of the Trinity in theory but have little need for it in the practice of the Christian faith"? You may answer the question in accord with your experience. I do remember, however, a moment in 1986 when this very question arose for me. In conjunction with digging at Capernaum, I stayed at a youth hostel in Tiberias. Tiberias is thinly populated by Lutherans, to say the least. After checking the synodical *Handbook* and a bit of soul searching, I attended the Franciscan church on Trinity Sunday and heard from the pulpit a classic exposition of the Holy Trinity. As I walked from the service along the Sea of Galilee, the question arose: "How many Missouri Synod churches would be observing Trinity Sunday? And, more significantly, how many homilies would meaningfully engage this doctrine

¹Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), ix. Later LaCugna comments: "The ultimate aim of the doctrine of the Trinity is not to produce a theory of God's self-relatedness. Precisely this approach has kept it out of the mainstream of theology and piety. Rather, since the trinitarian mystery of God is a dynamic and personal self-sharing that is realized over time and within the context of human history and personality, descriptions of God as static, or self-sufficient, or essentially unrelated to us directly conflict with biblical revelation and with our experience of God" (320). Significant studies on other aspects of trinitarian doctrine are Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) and Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Petersham, Mass.: St. Bede's Publications, 1975).

The Rev. Dr. Dean O. Wenthe is President of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Professor of Exegetical Theology.

as a significant feature of Christian confession and life?" Again, you can answer from your own experience.

The few reflections that follow are meant to stimulate conversation and critical analysis on where we are and why we are where we are. Your own pilgrimage may have exposed different hills and valleys, but these are the ones recommended for your consideration.

First Reflection: To retrieve a meaningful engagement of the trinitarian narrative of sacred Scripture, it is first necessary to appreciate the distinctive claims and character of this narrative. A contrasting narrative might illumine this point. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is a window on the culture and thought world of higher education in North America. In a recent issue, an article entitled "Why We Aren't So Special," contains this energizing vision:

At one point in Douglas Adam's hilarious *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a sperm whale plaintively wonders, "Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?" as it plummets toward the fictional planet Magrathea. This appealing but doomed creature had just been "called into existence" several miles above the planet's surface when a nuclear missile, directed at our heroes' spaceship, was inexplicably transformed into a sperm whale via an "Infinite Improbability Generator." Evolution, too, is an improbability generator, although its outcomes are considerably more finite.

Here, then, is a potentially dispiriting message for *Homo sapiens*: Every human being – just as every hippo, halibut, or hemlock tree – is similarly called into existence by that particular improbability generator called natural selection, after which each of us has no more inherent purpose, no more reason for being, no more central significance to the cosmos, than Douglas Adam's naive and ill-fated whale, whose blubber was soon to bespatter the Magrathen landscape.²

These paragraphs speak in stark language the unspoken assumption about the human race that fills the atmosphere of many academies. Is it any wonder that behaviors born of that assumption are all around us? To abort, to abuse, to euthanize in such an environment of understanding is almost understandable.

What a contrast to the description of humanity in the great trinitarian narrative of sacred Scripture! How radically distinctive is the claim of the Scriptural narrative from Genesis to Revelation that humanity is at the very

²David P. Barash, "Why We Aren't So Special," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2003, B12.

center of all that exists. Here man and woman are the apex of creation! Indeed, creation is ordered for their benefit and for their flourishing (Gen. 1 and 2). Here, instead of capricious selection there is blessing and divine direction. Here, there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Here, there is attention even to the very hairs on our head (Matt. 10:30). Here, the future entails a redemption of human beings and a restoration of creation (Isa. 65:17-25).

Have we lost, in practice if not in principle, the beauty and the coherence of Scripture's narrative for the life of the church? If the canonical texts have been fragmented by uncritical proof-texting on the right and uncritical dissection on the left, the inclusive and holistic nature of sacred Scripture *needs to be retrieved*, or at least this is my first suggestion.

The theological context in which we are called to carry out our vocation is succinctly described by the prolific pen of Walter Brueggemann:

The great new fact of interpretation is that we live in a pluralistic context, in which many different interpreters in many different specific contexts representing many different interests are at work on textual (theological) interpretation. The old consensus about limits and possibilities of interpretation no longer holds. Thus interpretation is no longer done by a small, tenured elite, but interpretive voices and their very different readings of the texts come from many cultures in all parts of the globe, and from many subcultures even in Western culture. The great interpretive reality is that there is no court of appeal behind these many different readings. There is no court of appeal beyond the text itself, and we are learning in new and startling ways how remarkably supple the text is and how open the varied readings are.³

At the same time, it should be noted that perceptive voices are being raised to challenge this hermeneutical meltdown. One example might balance our glance at the contemporary contours of theological education. Ellen T. Charry, Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, has written a rich study entitled *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* in which she challenges the prevailing set of assumptions about interpretation and the theological task. But she can speak for herself. Commenting on her reading of the great tradition, she writes:

For these theologians, beauty, truth, and goodness—the foundation of human happiness—come from knowing and loving God and nowhere

³Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 61-62.

else. I realized then why this no longer makes sense to us. All of these have become disjoined in the modern world, and especially the postmodern world, with the unsettling consequence that from the point of view of the classical tradition, we are moral and intellectual barbarians. . . . As I worked on the texts I came to think of myself as an Irish monk in a scriptorium, carefully preserving the tradition. Classic theological texts are becoming more scorned than read. I have sought to read the tradition sympathetically because a community that rejects its past is doomed.⁴

The past had a biblical trinitarian narrative that worked at more than the intellectual level. It also worked at the pastoral level, as Professor Charry so rightly notes. Recent interest in a sympathetic reading of the church fathers supports this viewpoint, namely, that we ignore these voices at our own expense:

Learning to read the Bible through the eyes of Christians from a different time and place will readily reveal the distorting effect of our own cultural, historical, linguistic, philosophical and, yes, even theological lenses. This is not to assert that the fathers did not have their own warped perspectives and blind spots. It is to argue, however, that we will not arrive at perspective and clarity regarding our own strengths and weaknesses if we refuse to look beyond our own theological and hermeneutical noses. God has been active throughout the church's history and we rob ourselves of the Holy Spirit's gifts if we refuse to budge beyond the comfort zone of our own ideas.⁵

Second Reflection: Literary and canonical readings of sacred Scripture can assist in our retrieval of the biblical trinitarian narrative. A very interesting and encompassing perspective on sacred Scripture comes from literary scholars who are attentive to how texts function and how their claims are negotiated with the reader. Eric Auerbach, in *Mimesis: The Representation of*

⁴Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), vii-viii. At the end of Professor Charry's book, she offers this noteworthy observation: "Theology today lives on the margins of the secular culture, the margins of the academy, and the margins of the church. It could be that responsibility for this marginalization lies equally with a desacralized culture and with the field of theology itself. Perhaps the renewal of theology is not unlike the renewal of the Christians about whom our theological teachers worried, as a mother cares for a child who has lost her way in a confusing world. She must be healed with love before she can flourish again" (245).

⁵Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 35.

Reality in Western Literature, writes, "The world of Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality – it insists that it is the only real world, and is destined to autocracy. . . . the Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us – they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected, we are rebels."⁶ This sense that the sacred Scriptures make a coherent, integrated, and inclusive claim upon its readers is critical to any adequate reading of it as trinitarian.

Richard Hays, New Testament Professor at Duke Divinity School, makes the same point in a slightly different fashion. He asserts:

I propose that one reason we have lost our grip on reading the Bible is that we have forfeited our understanding of it as a single coherent story – a story in which OT and NT together bear complementary witness to the saving action of the one God, a true story into which we find ourselves taken up. In order to recover a sense of Scripture's coherence – in order to live into this story and perceive its claim on our lives – it is necessary to affirm the mutually interpretive relation of the two Testaments. When we lose this sense of the coherence of Scripture, the Bible becomes somebody else's story. . . . the Gospels teach us how to read the OT, and – at the same time – the OT teaches us how to read the Gospels.⁷

Hays' position, as all here will recognize, separates his methodology from that prevailing in the academy. Yet, in this view we see the classical view of the church fathers, the Reformation fathers, and a significant segment of the Christian community today. It is in a retrieval of this canonically integrated reading that its trinitarian contours will become most sharply defined.

Here it is only right to note the name of Brevard S. Childs who has heroically challenged prevailing methodologies by writing extensively on the

⁶Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953), 14-15.

⁷Richard B. Hays, "Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?" *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (Fall 2002): 404-405. Earlier in the article, Hays offers this analysis (402): ". . . in postmodern culture the Bible has lost its place, and citizens in a pluralistic secular culture have trouble knowing what to make of it. If they pay any attention to it at all, they treat it as a consumer product, one more therapeutic option for rootless selves engaged in an endless quest to invent and improve themselves. Not surprisingly, this approach does not yield a very satisfactory reading of the Bible, for the Bible is not about 'self help,' but about God's (emphasis his) action to rescue a lost and broken world."

merits of interpreting the canonical texts in their final forms.⁸ At the same time, Professor Childs is not alone. A spectrum of Christian traditions have come to realize the huge loss when the sacred Scriptures are no longer read as a meaningful and coherent witness to the Triune God. Elizabeth Achtemeier, Carl E. Braaten, Karl P. Donfried, Thomas Hopko, Aidan J. Kavanagh, and Alister McGrath have addressed this loss.⁹ It must be noted that as laudable as these expressions of concern are, many (Braaten, Childs) remain far too deferential to prevailing historical-critical assumptions.

Subsequent papers will focus more narrowly upon the witness of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, but permit me to exploit for the moment the principle that Hays advances, namely, that "the Gospels teach us how to read the OT, and – at the same time – the OT teaches us how to read the Gospels."

Each of the Gospels positions the baptism of our Lord prominently. The church's exegetes and Luther saw these accounts as one of the most evident manifestations of the Holy Trinity. Matthew, of course, ends his Gospel with the Dominical admonition to baptize in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' exposition of His relationship to the Father, along with His promise of the Spirit in John's Gospel, as well as the many trinitarian formulas in the New Testament Epistles provide a lens through which to view the Old Testament. In a similar fashion, the Old Testament lens illumines the New Testament.

Third Reflection: The clarity of the trinitarian reading should be traced to the Dominical hermeneutic provided in the post resurrection period, i.e., that Christ Himself was the source of this reading in all of its fullness.

To recommend your consideration of this viewpoint, two texts from Luke 24 may well serve us. First, to the Emmaus disciples, we read: "He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24:25-27).

⁸Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

⁹See Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, editors, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Key issues swirling about in contemporary hermeneutics are described in Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); see also the fascinating study of Eta Linnemann, *Biblical Criticism on Trial* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001).

Then to the apostolic circle, He appears: "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the psalms.' Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day'" (Luke 24:44-45).

Particularly pregnant are the phrases τὰ περὶ ἑαυτοῦ at v. 27 and περὶ ἐμοῦ at v. 44. The Old Testament, even after the Resurrection, is the Lord's catechetical choice in teaching the disciples about Himself. Walter Moberly keenly observes about these passages, "This risen Jesus offers no new visions from heaven or mysteries from beyond the grave but instead focuses on the exposition of Israel's Scripture. The crucial truth lies there, not in some hidden heavenly revelation."¹⁰

Entailed in this understanding is the organic unity of apostolic exegesis with its Dominical source. Jesus asserts such an intimate connection in John, chapter 14: "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My name, will teach (ὑμᾶς διδάξει) you all things and will remind (ὑπομνήσει ὑμᾶς) you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25-26).¹¹

R. T. France, in his magisterial *Jesus and the Old Testament*, makes this point succinctly:

The school in which the writers of the early church learned to use the Old Testament was that of Jesus. If we could have developed our comparative study further we should have found many more evidences of the deviation of the Christian use of the Old Testament from Jesus: the development of the theme of Servant, the selection of Messianic testimonies, such as Psalm 110:1 and the "stone" passages, the whole eschatological scheme, and the further development of the sort of typology introduced by Jesus, which reached its full flowering in the letter to the Hebrews. It is all the more remarkable that this distinctive development, often in such strong opposition to traditional Jewish theology, took place entirely, in the earlier period, among Jews. This is the measure of the influence of Jesus.¹²

¹⁰R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 51.

¹¹This passage may well reflect early Rabbinic patterns in which the pupil needed to recall and to repeat the master's sayings. See Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Lund: C. W. K. Glerup, 1961).

¹²R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 225.

Fourth Reflection: A retrieval of the trinitarian narrative will revive meaningful catechesis and enhance our capacity to show the compelling logic of the Christian calling.

In a word, viewing the Old and New Testament as one trinitarian narrative provides clarity about who we are as moral agents, i.e., the indicatives describe our being so that the imperatives make wonderful and inviting sense. It is not insignificant that the Ten Commandments are introduced with the statement: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). The character of God and the character of God's people are intimately related for the history of their relationship illumines why God's people should live in a formed and definable fashion.

An awareness of how critical the trinitarian narrative is for moral instruction is an antidote against "Enlightenment ethics" that seek to divorce the agent from his or her history and social reality. Kantian ethics strives "to generate universal moral norms from self-relation in thinking and willing."¹³ When I was in the parish, I visited an FBI agent who had faithfully sent his children to our Sunday School. He clearly articulated to me that he regarded Sunday School as helpful in making his children into "good" people, while simultaneously indicating that he had no idea of who God might be. I tried in vain to convince him that the Sunday School stories and lessons were in every way dependent upon an understanding of God and His trinitarian ways with humanity.

The trinitarian character of sacred Scripture should concretely impact our *practice* of the Christian faith:

Through the economy of creation, redemption, deification, and consummation, experienced in the context of our own personal histories, we are enabled to know, love, and worship the true living God. God's face and name are proclaimed before us in creation, in God's words and deeds on our behalf, in the life and death of Jesus Christ, in the new community gathered by the Holy Spirit. The form of God's life in the economy dictates both the shape of our experience of that life and our reflection on that experience. Led by the Spirit more deeply into the life of Christ, we see the unveiled face of the living God. God's glory is beheld in Jesus Christ who is the instrument of our election, our

¹³William Schweiker, "Images of Scripture and Contemporary Theological Ethics," *Character and Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 41. See also Benjamin W. Farley, *In Praise of Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) and Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

adoption as daughters and sons of God, our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, and the cause of our everlasting inheritance of glory (Ephesians). In order to formulate an ethics that is authentically Christian, an ecclesiology and sacramental theology that are christological and pneumatological, a spirituality that is not generic but is shaped by the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, we must adhere to the form of God's self-revelation, God's concrete existences as Christ and Spirit. The purpose of the discipline of theology is to contemplate and serve that economy, to throw light on it if possible, so that we may behold the glory of God, *doxa theou*, ever more acutely.¹⁴

Fifth Reflection: The triune character of Scripture's narrative can be illuminated by a critical use of the category of character as God is portrayed in the Scriptures.¹⁵

One capacity exhibited by this research is its ability to view the Bible as a unity. Robert Alter writes:

The biblical tale, through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because these are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, engaging or suffering all the consequences of human freedom. . . . almost the whole range of biblical narrative, however, embodies the basic perception that man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others.¹⁶

Perhaps even more helpful is the care taken to define how one accurately comes to know the character of the Scriptural personages. An ascending scale of reliability is suggested:

The lower end of this scale—character revealed through actions or appearance—leave us substantially in the realm of influence. The middle categories, involving direct speech either by a character himself or by others about him, lead us from inference to the weighing of claims. . . . With the report of inward speech, we enter the realm of relative

¹⁴LaCugna, *God For Us*, 378.

¹⁵The literature is vast, but representative are the following works: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

¹⁶Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 22.

certainty about character: there is certainty, in any case, about the character's conscious intentions, though we may feel free to question the motive behind the intention. Finally, at the top of the ascending scale, we have the reliable narrator's explicit statement of what the characters feel, intend, desire; here we are accorded certainty.¹⁷

Consider whether the portrait of God's revelation and communication in these various categories does not permit a narrative wholeness that holds together what Scripture has joined, namely, the multiple, rich, and varied ways in which God comes to His people. Over reliance upon select proof texts can isolate and obscure this wholeness, even as historical-critical fragmentation can remove it completely.

W. Lee Humphreys has sought to refine and use Alter's category of character to describe God as He appears in Genesis. The results are diverse, with God being described as Sovereign Designer, Struggling Parent, Disciplining Father, Destroyer and Sustainer, The Jealous God, Sovereign Patron, Patron Challenged, Judge of All the Earth, Deliverer, Savage God, God of the Future, Silent Patron, Providential Designer.¹⁸

Two comments are in order. First, much of the work by scholars in this area assumes a lack of historicity. Here the unity of God's revelation in word and deeds of time and space is ruptured. At the same time, if one accepts the claims of the texts as historical in character, the same insights are worthy of consideration. Secondly, this is not a new method so much as a refinement of classic Christian engagement and exposition.

As I reviewed this material, three descriptions of God's character came to mind. The first is Jonah's lament over the compassion of Yahweh. "But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, 'O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow

¹⁷Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 117.

¹⁸W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001). Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 39) supplements the criteria for assessing character with: "1. Temporal ordering, especially where the actual sequence diverges from the chronological. 2. Analogical design: parallelism, contrast, variation, recurrence, symmetry, chiasm. 3. Point of view, e.g., the teller's powers and manipulations, shifts in perspective from external to internal rendering or from narration to monologue and dialogue (often signaled by elements so minute as names and other referring terms). 4. Representational proportions: scene, summary, repetition. 5. Informational gapping and ambiguity. 6. Strategies of characterization and judgment. 7. Modes of coherence, in units ranging from a verse to a book. 8. The interplay of verbal and compositional pattern."

to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jon. 4:1-2). The second is the portrait of God in Ps. 136 where both creation and salvation history are seen as expressions of His enduring and steadfast love. Finally, God's speeches (Job 38-40:2; 40:6-41:34) in response to Job wherein God simply describes Himself rather than address Job's question. The mere realization of God's character is sufficient for Job!

Surely there is a sense in which God's character is never too far from every Scriptural text. Its triune contours have been seen historically in such texts as Gen. 1:26; Isa. 6:8, 11:1-11, 42:1-9; the "angel of the Lord" texts, etc., but how are we to describe the rich and manifold nature of the theophanies that are central to the Torah: the three visitors (Gen. 18-20), the burning bush (Exod. 3), the pillar of fire and the cloud which accompany the presence of Yahweh's glory in the tabernacle, etc.? Does not the category of character provide a faithful way to understand the diverse expressions of God's ways with humanity in a manner that preserves the Scriptural tensions and liveliness? The richness of God's character in the Old Testament trumps any view that would reduce His nature to an undifferentiated monad. A trinitarian reading is not only compatible with the text, but the truthful and holistic reading that the prophetic and apostolic witness invites for us. Apostolic models can guide us here. For example, how many of you have pondered St. Paul's statement: "They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:3-4)?

Sixth Reflection: The trinitarian narrative can best be confessed and recommended when we acknowledge and embrace its particularity. This is especially urgent in our pluralistic context which, if we pause and reflect critically and historically, is not unlike the context that has faced Christians from the first proclamation of the Gospel.

Ponder for a moment the remarkable claims that the trinitarian narrative is offering: that in one segment of humanity and in one blood-line from Abraham through David, the God of all creation is revealing Himself; that in one place—a land that God would show to Abram and give to his descendants—He would uniquely dwell; that in one portable shrine, not in the great temples of the era, He would cause His glory to dwell for the benefit of His people.

Our culture permits each of us to have our private understandings of God and even permits us to express them. What is forbidden is that we confess with the Athanasian Creed: "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except everyone do keep

whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity."

Seventh Reflection: An emphasis on the trinitarian nature of our worship will refresh the faithful with the fullness of sacred Scripture's witness. Our religious setting in North America can reduce Jesus of Nazareth to a mere means to achieve a pleasant rather than a painful future. The trinitarian narrative offers a portrait of heaven as fellowship with the Triune God rather than a five-star resort. This fellowship begins in our baptism as we are joined to Christ's death and Resurrection and hence to the life of the Holy Trinity. A renewal of baptismal catechesis will provide the faithful with a fitting hermeneutic, even as the baptismal formula was foundational to the early church's confession and understanding of God.

There is no doubt that the Christians were distinguished from the start from other believers, Jews and non-Jews, by the fact that they admitted converts to the community of Jesus Christ by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28, 19; Didache 7). . . . This baptismal creed, based on the experience of the spiritual presence of Jesus of Nazareth, confirmed by God in His resurrection as Christ and Lord, represented a decisive influence for the whole evolution of trinitarian dogma and theology. As *norma normans* it determined three aspects of this: it ensured the predominance of the Father-Son-Spirit terminology; it showed the order these three guarantees of Christian baptism; and it suggested that all three exist equally in the divine sphere.¹⁹

The often observed rule that we believe as we worship—*lex orandi, lex credendi*—should cause each of us to ponder. Do we worship as though the blessed and Holy Trinity is the construct of our private piety and spirituality? Do we worship as though the divine drama of salvation were intended to meet one of our felt-needs or even entertain us? Do we communicate to those who visit our worship that the mystery and majesty and holiness of the Trinity is no longer central to His character?

No more fitting conclusion could be offered than to counter the contrasting claims of the prevailing academic culture that human beings are marginal or meaningless to the cosmos (David P. Barash's narrative on "Why We Aren't So Special") than the following exposition of the Triune God's character:

¹⁹B. Studer, "Trinity," in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 851.

Christian orthopraxis must correspond to what we believe to be true about God: that God is personal, that God is ecstatic and fecund love, that God's very nature is to exist toward and for another. The mystery of existence is the mystery of the commingling of persons, divine and human, in a common life, within a common household. We were created from God, *ek theou*, and also for God, *pros ton theon* (John 1:1). God, too, lives from and for another: God the Father gives birth to the Son, breathes forth the Spirit, elects the creature from before all time. Loving from others and for others is the path of glory in which we and God exist together. The light of God's grace and life can indeed be dimmed or possibly even extinguished by sin, which is the absence of praise and the annihilation of communion. The cardinal sin, the sin that lies at the root of all sin (including but not reducible to pride) is whatever binds us to prepersonal or impersonal or antipersonal existence: the denial that we are persons from and for God, from and for others.²⁰

²⁰LaCugna, *God For Us*, 383.