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THE OVERLOOKED IMPORTANCE OF DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS IN
MODERN TRINITARIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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A regularly-encountered phrase in the landscape of modern Trinitarian scholarship is that of “theological retrieval,” or “Trinitarian retrieval.” Especially in recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in connecting what we know about the living God from the pages of Scripture—specifically, what we know about His triunity—to what our Nicene-era forefathers taught on these matters. The aim of this process of “theological retrieval,” it is said, is to extract the purest possible form of Nicene orthodoxy, by bringing into progressively sharper focus those Trinitarian truths which were settled upon at the Council of Nicaea of 325 A.D. and the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.

The aim of this movement—that of “theological retrieval,” or “Trinitarian retrieval”—is a noble one. Getting the Trinity right is, of course, a matter of paramount significance. In the constellation of doctrines that Christians have debated (and fought about) over the centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity is and always has been a matter of first importance. This matter of “Trinitarian retrieval,” then, is both understandable and needed. To borrow from C.S. Lewis, the “clean sea breeze of the centuries”¹ can have salutary effects—particularly in the area of challenging and directing Christians toward greater Trinitarian accuracy.

However, the path from today’s Trinitarianism back into the earliest centuries of church history, as a means of “retrieving” a sound Nicene doctrine of the triunity of the Godhead, has been a narrow one—at least in one sense. This narrowness is seen in the fact that both the published and popular (read=Twitterverse) Trinitarian scholarship of our day overwhelmingly favors the Trinitarian writings of non-dispensational scholars over the Trinitarian writings of dispensational scholars. Though dispensational authors have written on the Trinity, and though their writings (rooted in their consistent hermeneutical commitments) should be a welcome addition to modern Trinitarian discussions, the voices of dispensational scholars have largely gone ignored in this ever-developing field of theological research.

The thesis of this paper is threefold: (1) that there is, in fact, a latent bias in modern Trinitarian scholarship—specifically, that which is focused on “retrieving” Nicene orthodoxy—away from the contributions of dispensational authors and toward the contributions of non-dispensational authors; (2) that this bias appears to be rooted in the myth that dispensational scholars have not made any significant (or worthy) contributions to Trinitarian scholarship; and (3) that this bias appears to be rooted in the myth that dispensational scholars, in light of their

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¹ C.S. Lewis, “Introduction” to Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation* (Shippensburg, PA: Nori Media Group, 2022), 12.

concern primarily with matters of eschatology and ecclesiology (namely, the distinction between Israel and the church), have nothing to contribute to other categories of systematic theology—including Trinitarian theology.

In reality, there have already been several key contributions made to the field of Trinitarianism by dispensational scholars. Moreover, additional dispensational voices ought to be welcomed to this discussion, since the commitment of dispensationalism to a consistently literal, grammatical, and historical hermeneutic will more naturally and closely align with Nicene orthodoxy—which is the ultimate aim of all modern “Trinitarian retrieval” efforts.

HONORABLE CAUSE

Anyone who has picked up a book written in the past ten years on the subject of the Trinity likely will have found that the book makes reference to some aspect of “retrieving,” “recovering,” or “reviving” Nicene Trinitarian orthodoxy. And that is because, as Fred Sanders has put it: “The doctrine of the Trinity always seems to be making a comeback.”² What is at the root of this modern fascination with theological—and specifically, Trinitarian—“retrieval”? Several modern Trinitarian scholars have weighed in on this question.

According to Khaled Anatolios, “Like other aspects of recognized church doctrine, the conception of God as Trinity seemed, to many traditional Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to be formulated already with a clarity that left it beyond discussion.”³ In other words, the doctrine was settled and assumed, but stale and academic, with the result being that “God’s trinitarian being has come to seem, for many modern Christians, far removed from what faith is really about.”⁴ Robert Letham makes a similar observation, stating: “For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove, remote from daily life.”⁵ Though the Christian faith is Triune, and though Christians worship a Triune God, the sense among scholars and pastors alike is that Trinitarian truth has been taken for granted in our day.⁶

² Fred Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity & Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), 182.

³ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), ix.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 1.

⁶ Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2005) (“For many Christians the Trinity has become something akin to their appendix: it’s there, but they’re not sure what its function is, they get by in life without it doing very much, and if they had to have it removed they wouldn’t be too distressed.”); Alister McGrath, “Trinitarian Theology,” in Mark A. Noll and Ronald F. Thiemann, eds., *Where Shall My Wond’ring Soul Begin: The Landscape of Evangelical Piety and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 53.

In response to this unfortunate shelving of the Trinity in the modern Christian consciousness, “there has been a surprising revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity since the second half of the twentieth century.”⁷ As the renowned Nicene Trinitarian scholar Lewis Ayres has stated: “It has become commonplace in the last thirty or forty years to speak of a revival in Trinitarian theology, and to assume that in the previous century or two the doctrine was seriously neglected.”⁸

Some who are writing on this matter of theological “retrieval” are focused on specific aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity, such as the doctrine of divine simplicity,⁹ the doctrine of divine impassibility,¹⁰ the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son,¹¹ the doctrine of the eternal submission of the Son,¹² or the doctrine of Christology in light of the doctrine of God.¹³ Some who are writing on this matter of theological “retrieval” are concerned with reviving an interest in the “Great Tradition.”¹⁴ And some who are writing on this matter of theological “retrieval” are concerned with what is being called “Trinity drift,” that is, a slow and otherwise-

⁷ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 1.

⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 407. Fred Sanders, however, sees today’s fascination with Trinitarian retrieval as not being modern at all. He believes that modern Trinitarian theologians’ pursuit of theological “retrieval” “resonate[s] deeply with something that has always accompanied trinitarian theology: a retrospective element, a gesture of reaching back, a return to deep sources. The retrospective tone can be heard in all the classic documents of trinitarianism. The Nicene Creed itself (that is, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381) was already an exercise in resolutely reclaiming the theological achievement of 325’s Council of Nicaea. Even the prologue of John’s gospel, so influential for the main lines of patristic thought, framed its teaching not as a sheer *novum* but as an enriched rereading of Moses, one that found more persons present ‘in the beginning’ than had originally been imagined by readers of Genesis. Trinitarianism appears to be not just a doctrine that is frequently subject to retrieval, but perhaps a dogmatic case of retrieval all the way down.” Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation*, 182-183.

⁹ James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017).

¹⁰ Samuel Renihan, *God Without Passions: A Primer* (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2015).

¹¹ Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain, eds., *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

¹² D. Glenn Butner, Jr., *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

¹³ Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

¹⁴ Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021). By “Great Tradition,” Carter is referring “to the key century from the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 to the death of Augustine in AD 430. This is the formative period when the classical Christian doctrine of God took shape and was expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, which is more popularly known as the Nicene Creed.” *Ibid.*, 22.

imperceptible drifting away from Nicene orthodoxy and toward some of the very heresies which the Council of Nicaea condemned.¹⁵

Regardless of the angle or the approach for doing so, at the heart of the idea of Trinitarian “retrieval” is taking the Trinity back to Nicene shores.¹⁶ In addition to historical fidelity, the stated benefits of this “recovery of the Trinity at the ground level”¹⁷ include a purer form of Triune worship, a right view of the Trinity in creation, a right view of others made in the image of the Triune God revealed in Scripture, and the future progress of evangelism and missions, as more and more souls come to know that same one-in-three God.¹⁸

HALFWAY COMMITTED

While the pursuit of theological “retrieval”—and specifically, Trinitarian “retrieval”—is to be commended, the reality is that the adherents to this method have been rather myopic in their approach to “retrieval,” as they have left out a wide swath of existing Trinitarian scholarship—namely, that of dispensational scholars—as they work their way back through the centuries in their process of “retrieval.”

This is no small matter of oversight, considering that every theologian who has demonstrated any form of interest in “retrieving” Nicene Trinitarian orthodoxy necessarily must work their way backward—from the current landscape of Trinitarian theology, from their own theological tradition, from their own theological presuppositions, and from their own theological biases—as they make their way back toward Nicene headwaters. Put another way, to determine to what extent modern Trinitarianism is at odds with Nicaea, and to gauge the extent of the current “drift” from Nicaea, a comprehensive baseline analysis of where Trinitarianism stands *today* must first be conducted. However, those who are interested in “retrieving” Nicaea have not been comprehensive in their analysis of the current Trinitarian landscape, in that they have left

¹⁵ Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021).

¹⁶ Anatolios is helpful on this point. He writes: “My premise is that if we wish to understand trinitarian doctrine, we must observe how it came to be formulated in the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) and how such formulations were interpreted in the immediate aftermath of these councils. The approach taken here rejects as simplistic any sharp distinction between ‘historical theology’ (as ‘what it meant then’) and ‘systematic theology’ (as ‘what it means now’). Rather, it traces the logic whereby trinitarian doctrine developed in order to find resources for contemporary appropriation of this doctrine. We cannot ignore the historical development and gain direct access to the objective referents of the normative statements of trinitarian doctrine; we must creatively re-perform the acts of understanding and interpretation that led to those statements. In other words, in order to grasp trinitarian doctrine creatively in our own setting, we must ‘retrieve Nicaea’.” Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 1. Anatolios continues: “In this perspective, ‘Nicaea’ refers not to the historical event of 325 in and of itself but rather to that event as appropriated and interpreted by those who over the succeeding decades claimed to be—and later were generally accepted as being—in continuity with its declaration of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son. They understood that declaration to entail both unity of being and real distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit.” *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-11.

one significant perspective—that of the dispensationalists—out of their discussions. A handful of case studies are offered below.

Craig Carter has offered his *mea culpa* for being late to the modern movement of Trinitarian “retrieval,” saying: “I admit to having been part of the problem. I am painfully aware of how little I understood the fourth-century debates over the doctrine of God until the past fifteen years.”¹⁹ Having experienced his own Trinitarian renaissance, Carter goes on to share his conviction that “there is no future for orthodox theology unless pastors and professors make it a priority to understand the classical tradition of Nicene orthodoxy.”²⁰ He continues: “As I become increasingly aware of the distance between Nicene orthodoxy and much of contemporary evangelical theology, I realize my need for deeper roots in a living tradition.”²¹

There is much to be commended in Carter’s transparency, theological humility, and stated desire to get back to Nicene roots in developing a robust Trinitarianism. But Carter is open in his admission that he has assembled a very limited group of modern-day theologians to go back with him in time on this quest. The theological partners he has tapped for this journey are but few: Michael Allen, Scott R. Swain, Richard Muller, Carl Trueman, J.V. Fesko, James Dolezal, and Steven J. Duby. Each of these men is, in his own right, a well-published, thoughtful, and respected Trinitarian scholar. However, none of these scholars is a dispensationalist or is otherwise known for being supportive of dispensational scholars or dispensational scholarship.²²

In *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, Baptist theologian Matthew Barrett does an admirable job of pushing back against what he calls “Trinity drift,” i.e., a drift away from basic principles of Nicene Trinitarian orthodoxy and in the direction of the social trinitarianism and tritheism over the past 100 years. But as he works his way back to Nicaea, Barrett takes a very narrow path—namely, a path lit largely by the writings of covenantal, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and other purely academic theologians. As he takes his readers back to Nicaea, Barrett limits his older conversation partners to men like Francis Turretin, Geerhardus Vos, John Owen, John Calvin, John Gill, and Thomas Aquinas,²³ while his

¹⁹ Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*, 10.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Carter’s insights, and omissions, carry great weight in today’s academic circles. *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition* was the 2021 recipient of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology*’s 2021 Book of the Year Award (in the category of Theological Studies), and received an Honorable Mention (in the category of Academic Theology) for The Gospel Coalition’s 2021 Book Award.

²³ Nowadays, Barrett is not only encouraging—but urging—Protestants to dive deep into the study of Thomas Aquinas (a medieval Roman Catholic theologian) in their study of the doctrine of God. Barrett, who serves as Associate Professor of Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theology Seminary, is the Executive Editor of *Credo Magazine*, whose latest issue (Volume 13, Issue 2) is titled “What Can Protestants Learn from Thomas Aquinas?” In the issue’s lead article, titled “First Principles,” Barrett refers to Aquinas as a “beacon of orthodoxy” (<https://credomag.com/article/25-myths-about-thomas-aquinas/>) (June 23, 2022) (accessed August 31, 2022). Barrett also recently founded the Center for Classical Theology, which “exists to contemplate God and all things in relation

more modern conversation partners are men like J.V. Fesko, John Webster, D.A. Carson, Liam Goligher, Stephen Holmes, and Gilles Emery.²⁴

Again, each of the men with whom Barrett has joined forces is an esteemed Trinitarian scholar whose works are worthy of consideration as one treads a path back to Nicaea. However, theirs are not the only works in this field, and theirs are not the only voices to be considered. As he fights “Trinity drift” on the road back to Nicaea, Barrett fails to give even a passing glance to the Trinitarian contributions of men like Lewis Sperry Chafer, John F. Walvoord, or Charles C. Ryrie (to name a few). The Trinitarian writings of dispensational theologians are not only not an afterthought for Barrett—they are given no consideration at all.²⁵

In his recent work on *Trinitarian Dogmatics*,²⁶ D. Glenn Butner, Jr. expresses a similar desire to tease out the foundational (i.e., Nicene) essentials of Trinitarian orthodoxy. However, while Butner’s expressed concern is to engage with “the exegetical foundations of the doctrine of the Trinity” and to engage in “accurate historical analysis of concepts that have become fundamental to any dogmatic account of the Trinity,”²⁷ he is open about his willingness to consider many other sources of wisdom (that is, beyond exegesis, and beyond history) as he engages on his own trek back to Nicaea.

For instance, Butner portrays his quest as being informed not only by Scripture, but also by tradition and reason.²⁸ In other words, for Butner, Scripture alone does not inform one’s understanding of the Trinity. Rather, it is Scripture, plus tradition, plus one’s human reasoning faculties. Further, Butner notes that his status as a “modern white American male theologian . . . could distort my understanding of God,” and so, he says, “throughout this work I will strategically refer to theological perspectives of people occupying different cultural locations, my aim being to identify cases where cultural differences may result in divergent theological assumptions or claims.”²⁹ Last, similar to theologians like Carter and Barrett, Butner engages with the Trinitarian writings of scholars both from this century and from centuries past, including William Ames, Wilhelmus á Brakel, Francis Turretin, Zacharias Ursinus, John Owen, Colin Gunton, Charles Hodge, and Fred Sanders, as he develops his own set of convictions about

to God by listening with humility to his word with the wisdom of the Great Tradition.” <https://credomag.com/center-for-classical-theology/> (accessed August 31, 2022).

²⁴ Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 11, 95, 109, 125, 143, 149, 155, 163, 166, 173, 177, 184, 213, 222, 228-229, 234-35, 238, 240, 243, 300, 308-309, 312.

²⁵ Like Carter, Barrett has an outsized influence in academic theological circles today. *Simply Trinity* was named the 2021 winner of *Christianity Today*’s Theology and Ethics Book of the Year.

²⁶ D. Glenn Butner, Jr., *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ In Butner’s words, “tradition, too, plays a role in this quest for knowledge of the Trinity.” *Ibid.*, 6. Butner goes on to say that “reason, too, has a role to play in [Trinitarian] dogmatics, and necessarily so.” *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Trinitarian orthodoxy.³⁰ His own writing indicates that Butner is willing to hear many other and diverse voices as he develops his *Trinitarian Dogmatics*. However, he has tuned out completely the voices of dispensational theologians. None are mentioned or cited in his work.

Carter, Barrett, and Butner are not on their own in their lack of engagement with the Trinitarian works of dispensational scholars. Rather, having written their respective works in 2021 and 2022, these authors just happen to be the most recent examples of this phenomenon. The trend, however, goes back many years.³¹

The purpose of this paper is not to critique the concept of theological “retrieval” *per se*. This author affirms that getting back to the source (*ad fontes*) of the earliest Trinitarian writings

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59, 63, 118-119, 139, 149, 163-165, 208-209.

³¹ For instance, in his work *Delighting in the Trinity: Why Father, Son, and Spirit are Good News* (Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company, 2010), Tim Chester cites such neo-orthodox figures as Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann in developing his doctrine of the Trinity (112-114), liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff (114), Roman Catholic theologians such as Catherine Mowry LaCugna (114), and Eastern Orthodox theologians such as John Zizioulas (115). However, nowhere to be found is a citation or reference to a single dispensational scholar.

Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain are co-editors of a book (*Retrieving Eternal Generation*) that is focused on the “retrieval” of a particular aspect of Trinitarian orthodoxy—the doctrine of eternal generation (a doctrine this author agrees needs to be “retrieved”). However, it is Sanders’ and Swain’s methodology—specifically, their selection of contributors to this edited work—which stands out. In addition to the editors themselves, their selected group of contributors includes Matthew Y. Emerson, D.A. Carson, Charles Lee Irons, Lewis Ayres, and Chad Van Dixhoorn. Each is a worthy Trinitarian scholar, but none is a dispensationalist.

As he pursues his own venture back to Nicaea in *The Quest for the Trinity*, Stephen R. Holmes goes back and surveys the landscape of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century orthodoxy, however, the only Trinitarian theologians he mentions are Karl Barth (a neo-orthodox theologian), Karl Rahner (a Roman Catholic theologian), John Zizioulas (an Eastern Orthodox bishop), Robert Jenson (a Lutheran theologian), Leonardo Boff (a Brazilian liberation theologian), and various philosophers such as Cornelius Plantinga, Michael Rea, and Brian Leftow. While Holmes does carefully and skillfully work through the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, he does so by operating from the assumption that the only modern Trinitarian scholars worth considering as he weighs their thoughts against the various original sources are non-dispensational scholars. Holmes calls the subject of his study “a Trinitarian revival” (*The Quest for the Trinity*, 200), and yet he does not account for or invite any dispensational theologians to join him.

On page 110 of his work, *Giving Glory to the Consubstantial Trinity: An Essay on the Quintessence of the Christian Faith* (Greenbrier, AR: Free Grace Press, 2018), Michael A.G. Haykin writes: “it is an honor to stand with that great cloud of Christian witnesses down through the centuries who have declared their belief in the Triune God and, in the words of Macarius, a Syrian monk and friend of Gregory of Nyssa, have given ‘glory to the consubstantial Trinity.’” In other words, Haykin counts a Syrian monk among this “great cloud of Christian witnesses” who affirm Trinitarian truth, but does not list, quote, or cite a single dispensational theologian among that same group.

As a final example, *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) makes no reference to any Trinitarian contributions made by dispensational scholars. Hegelian, Lutheran, and liberal theologians are referenced and cited approvingly, and references are made to Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Eberhard Jüngel, but no mention is made of any dispensational contributions to Trinitarian theology.

is a noble task and a worthy endeavor. Rather, the cause for concern is the approach that has been taken by modern Trinitarian scholars, who appear to have no interest in engaging with dispensational scholars on their writings concerning the Trinity.

HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

So far, this paper has commended the task of Trinitarian “retrieval,” while expressing concern with the oversight of Trinitarian contributions which have been made by dispensational scholars. This opens up another question: have dispensational scholars made any contributions to the field of Trinitarian scholarship, or instead is this paper a Quixotic fight against non-existent theological windmills?

As will be seen in the paragraphs below, dispensational theologians have made meaningful contributions to the field of the study of the Trinity. More work in this field certainly can (and as the concluding remarks of this paper posit—*should*) be done by dispensational scholars, but dispensationalists have not been silent on the subject of the Triune Godhead. What follows is a sampling of the contributions dispensational scholars have already made to the field of Trinitarianism.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, in his *Systematic Theology*, handled various aspects of Trinitarian theology with acumen and clarity. Of particular note, and showcasing the depth of his familiarity with and thoughts about Trinitarian matters, Chafer ably answered any philosophical or metaphysical objections to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity when he said:

“The *how* of any superhuman reality is not, and probably could not be, apprehended by the finite mind. It is enough to know from a trustworthy source that the reality *does* exist. To understand a proposition is one thing; to understand the truth or fact asserted in that proposition is quite another thing. These two aspects of understanding are constantly distinguished in human experience. No scientist or philosopher has an explanation to offer as to how mind acts upon matter, nor can they discover the mysteries which are related to life itself—nutrition, assimilation, and growth—, nor can they understand the inner workings of a vast array of proved facts and forces which nature presents. Inability to penetrate into the depths of such phenomena is not considered a reason for rejection of the obvious facts themselves. The triune mode of existence of the three Persons who form one Essence belongs to a category of ultimate facts and the inexplicable feature is not to be confounded with the evidence for the abstract and actual truth itself. No argument has been advanced against the trinitarian conception other than that it does not conform to the limitations of the mind of man.”³²

³² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (vol. 1) (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 273-274 (emphasis in original). Along with John F. Walvoord, Chafer waded further into the mystery of the Trinity, without wavering in his recognition of the doctrine of the Trinity being a matter of clear biblical revelation: “The many indications in both the Old and New Testaments that God exists or subsists as a triune being have made the doctrine of the Trinity a central fact of all orthodox creeds from the early church until modern times. Any departure from this is considered a departure from scriptural truth. Although the word trinity does not occur in the Bible, the facts of scriptural revelation permit no other explanation . . . While the doctrine of the Trinity is a central fact of Christian

In his *Basic Theology*, Charles C. Ryrie provided several additional key insights pertaining to the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, Ryrie refused to over-read Proverbs 8:12-31 as being a passage which refers to Christ (as some have done in order “find” the Trinity in the Old Testament). Rather, according to Ryrie, “it seems better to understand the passage not as an adumbration of Christ but describing the eternal character of wisdom as an attribute of God.”³³ Ryrie then addressed legitimate instances in which we see groundwork being laid in the Old Testament for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity: “the doctrine [of the Trinity] exists only in seminal form in the Old Testament. It is questionable whether, without the flowering of the doctrine in the New Testament, we would know solely from the Old Testament what those seeds were.”³⁴ Ryrie also interacted with the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit, providing key insights as to how we are to understand how the three Persons of the Godhead relate to each other eternally.³⁵ Ryrie demonstrated further Trinitarian sophistication in working through the distinctions between the *ad intra* and *ad extra* acts of the Trinity.³⁶ Ryrie also skillfully refuted certain unhelpful man-made illustrations that have been given for the Trinity.³⁷ Finally, Ryrie succinctly provided a history of the doctrine of the Trinity, by tracing out heresies (including Monarchianism and Arianism), the Council of Constantinople and the Synod of Toledo, the contributions of Augustine in his *De Trinitate*, and the works of the Reformers on the Trinity.³⁸

faith, it is also beyond human comprehension and has no parallel in human experience. It is best defined as holding that, while God is one, He exists as three persons. These persons are equal, have the same attributes, and are equally worthy of adoration, worship, and faith. Yet the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead makes clear that they are not three separate gods, like three separate human beings such as Peter, James, and John. Accordingly, the Christian faith is not tritheism, a belief in three Gods. On the other hand, the Trinity must not be explained as three modes of existence, that is, one God manifesting Himself in three ways. The Trinity is essential to the being of God and is more than a form of divine revelation.” Lewis Sperry Chafer and John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 40.

³³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 59.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 62.

³⁶ As Ryrie correctly noted, “the concept of the economical Trinity concerns administration, management, actions of the persons, or the *opera ad extra* (‘works outside,’ that is, on the creation and its creatures). For the Father this includes the work of electing (1 Pet. 1:2), loving the world (John 3:16), and giving good gifts (James 1:17). For the Son it emphasizes His suffering (Mark 8:31), redeeming (1 Pet. 1:18), and upholding all things (Heb. 1:3). For the Spirit it focuses on His particular works of regenerating (Titus 3:5), energizing (Acts 1:8), and sanctifying (Gal. 5:22-23).” Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 63.

³⁸ Ibid., 64-67. Ryrie offered further exegetical support for the Trinity when he said: “Even if the word *person* is not the best, it does guard against modalism, and, of course, the phrase ‘the same in substance’ (or perhaps better, essence) protects against tritheism. The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three Persons. John 10:30: ‘I and the Father are One,’ beautifully states this balance between the diversity of the Persons and the unity of the essence. ‘I and the Father’ clearly distinguishes two Persons, and the verb, ‘We are,’ is also plural. But, said the Lord, ‘We are One,’ and *One* is neuter; that is, one in nature or essence, but not one Person (which would require the masculine form). Thus the Lord distinguishes Himself from the Father and yet claimed unity and equality with the Father.” Ibid., 61. Ryrie then provided certain helpful insights into how a developed

John F. Walvoord drew an important connection between Christological orthodoxy and matters of orthodox Trinitarianism—and in doing so deftly crossed between categories of systematic theology—when he said: “Historically, the trinitarian doctrine turns largely on the question of whether the Son of God is eternal, whether He has the attribute of personality and the very nature of God. The problems of the doctrine of the Trinity largely arise in the studies of Christ in His incarnate state . . . It is safe to say that no attack on the person of Christ can be made without attacking the doctrine of the Trinity, as they stand and fall together.”³⁹

In his published *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Henry Clarence Thiessen made several additional contributions pertaining to Trinitarian matters. For instance, almost prophetically (considering the nature of the heated debates that are occurring today over this subject), Thiessen wrote: “The doctrine of the trinity is not a truth of natural theology, but of revelation.”⁴⁰ Also notable from Thiessen’s writing on the Trinity was his expansive yet concise development of the many biblical evidences for both the deity and personhood of all three members of the Godhead.⁴¹ Last, Thiessen’s writings on the Trinity are to be commended for his willingness to engage with theologians representing camps with whom he would have ultimately disagreed to support the development of his own thoughts on the Trinity.⁴²

In his work, *Practical Christian Theology*, Floyd H. Barackman ably handled several key aspects of Trinitarian doctrine. Barackman helpfully wove together the important biblical concepts of the unity of God’s essence and the triunity of His persons,⁴³ concisely refuted various false Trinitarian errors, including Sabellianism, Arianism, and Tritheism,⁴⁴ and skillfully engaged with various Scriptures to build out a helpful (and biblical) picture of each Person of the Godhead, their interaction with each other, and their actions.⁴⁵

doctrine of the Trinity reaches into other areas of Christian theology: “The richness of the concept of the Trinity overflows into several areas of theology. The doctrine of redemption is an obvious example, for all Persons of the Godhead are involved in that great work (John 3:6, 16; Rev. 13:8). The doctrine of revelation serves as another example, the Son and Spirit both being involved in communicating God’s truth (John 1:18, 16:13). Fellowship and love within the Godhead is only possible in a trinitarian conception of God, and the fellowship is akin to the believer’s fellowship with Christ (14:17) . . . Prayer is practiced in a trinitarian way. Though we may address any Person of the Trinity, ordinarily, according to the biblical precedent, we address the Father in the name of Christ as the Spirit directs us (John 14:14, Eph. 1:6; 2:18; 6:18).” Ibid., 67-68.

³⁹ John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 32.

⁴⁰ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 89. In a similar vein, Thiessen noted (correctly) that “[t]he Christian doctrine of the trinity, mysterious as it may seem, is not an outgrowth of speculation but of revelation.” Ibid., 90.

⁴¹ Ibid., 89-98.

⁴² For instance, in his chapter on the Trinity, Thiessen cited non-dispensational authors such as Louis Berkhof and Loraine Boettner for their helpful contributions to Trinitarian subjects.

⁴³ Floyd H. Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2001), 60-61.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 63-65. Barackman is also to be commended for including an entire chapter in his systematic theology to the oft-overlooked subject of Paterology—the doctrine of God the Father.

In his work *The Moody Handbook on Theology*, Paul Enns made several significant contributions to Trinitarian scholarship. First, Enns noted the potential inadequacy of the word “Trinity” (first coined by Tertullian of Carthage in the late second century): “The term *Trinity* is not the best one because it emphasizes only the three persons but not the unity within the Trinity. The German word *Dreieinigkeit* (‘three-oneness’) better expresses the concept. A proper definition then must include the distinctness and equality of the three persons within the Trinity as well as the unity within the Trinity. The word *Triunity* may better express the doctrine.”⁴⁶ Enns also went deep into the annals of church history in bringing out the names of John Ascunages and John Philoponus—men who promoted the heresy of tritheism. As Enns noted, these Ascunages and Philoponus “taught that there were three who were God but they were only related in a loose association as, for example, Peter, James, and John were as disciples. The error of this teaching was that its proponents abandoned the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three Gods rather than three Persons within one Godhead.”⁴⁷ Enns also ably handled two terms—“firstborn” and “only begotten”—which throughout the centuries have caused confusion, even leading some to deny the deity of Christ (and, in doing so, deny the Bible’s teachings on the Trinity).⁴⁸

Last, Robert Lightner’s writings demonstrate a particularly acute awareness of historical developments surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity—the very developments that those today who are committed to Trinitarian “retrieval” are most interested in. As but a sampling of Lightner’s refinement of thought on historical-theological matters, he has written:

“The literature of this early period gives overwhelming evidence of belief in one God (monotheism), as opposed to the heathen belief in many gods (polytheism) . . . In the second century writers placed special emphasis on defending the Christian faith against the inroads of Judaism, Gnosticism, and heathenism in general. Some outstanding men among them were Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, and Athenagoras . . . They presented a philosophical concept of Christ not at all in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament. To them the Logos, or Word, of John 1:1 was not the eternally existing person of God the Son. They insisted rather that the Logos existed eternally in God only as divine reason, not as a person . . .”

“The doctrine of Christ the Logos as a separate, fully divine person distinct from the Father and the Spirit was viewed as endangering the unity of God by some. On the other hand, viewing the Logos as in some sense subordinate to the Father compromised his deity. The attempt was made to maintain the sole government of God and at the same time retain belief in the full deity of Christ. Two different schools of thought arose to which Tertullian applied the name Monarchianism. Dynamic Monarchianism was concerned primarily with stressing God’s unity and

⁴⁶ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 199 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 202-203.

oneness; Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, was its most noted representative. Modalistic Monarchianism was more influential; it laid more stress on the Christological side of the issue, though unity of God was still a point of interest. The three persons of the Godhead were conceived as three different modes of existence in which God manifested himself. Sabellius was the chief spokesman for modalistic monarchianism . . . He said that in the Father, God revealed himself as Creator, in the Son as Redeemer, and in the Spirit as Sanctifier. Father, Son, and Spirit were therefore not three distinct persons but roles played by one person . . .”

“The anti-Gnostic fathers believed in one God who was not only the Creator but also the Redeemer. The law was given by him, and so was the gospel. This God was one in essence but three in subsistence. Two of the most outstanding anti-Gnostic fathers were Irenaeus (ca. 130-202) and Tertullian (ca. 160-220). The latter was the first to write of the tripersonality of God and to use the term *trinity* with reference to God.”⁴⁹

The above references to the works of men like Chafer, Walvoord, Ryrie, Thiessen, Barackman, Enns, and Lightner are not meant to be exhaustive. Each has said much more on the subject of the Trinity than what is mentioned here, and much more could be said not only of their Trinitarian contributions, but the Trinitarian contributions of other dispensational scholars. Rather, these contributions are being surfaced here to show that many helpful contributions to Trinitarian scholarship have already been made by dispensational scholars, which those who are interested in matters of the Trinity (especially those interested in theological “retrieval” of an orthodox Trinitarianism) ought not pass up.

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The above contributions made by dispensational scholars to the field of Trinitarianism are noteworthy not merely because of the “dispensational” identity of each scholar quoted, and not merely because of their omission from modern works on Trinitarian retrieval. Further, these contributions are noteworthy because of the hermeneutical convictions to which men like Chafer, Walvoord, Ryrie, Thiessen, Barackman, Enns, and Lightner have held. As will be discussed next, the commitment of these men to a dispensational (i.e., consistently literal, grammatical, historical) hermeneutic provides them with the strongest and surest footing for understanding and writing about the Triune God—not only in the present Trinitarian climate but also in measuring their views against historic Nicene orthodoxy.

At the outset, it is important to note that any sound, orthodox understanding of the Trinity must stem from appropriate theological methods,⁵⁰ at the root of which are one’s hermeneutical

⁴⁹ Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995), 36, 38, 40-41.

⁵⁰ “Theological method is a crucial consideration because it determines both how we come to know the object of our studies and what we can know about the object of our studies. What questions we ask and how we pursue the answers to the questions are foundational to theological reflection. Theological inquiry, and consequently, its method, is a unique subject matter because the object of study is the personal, triune God, who

commitments. It is also important to note that in today’s academic climate, the hermeneutics of the more popular and published Trinitarian scholars are unclear at best, and slippery at worst. It is not uncommon, in today’s academic landscape, to see Trinitarian scholars tipping their hat in the direction of methods of sound biblical interpretation, when in reality they are employing methods of hermeneutics which appear to be driven more by their own Trinitarian, denominational, or other academic presuppositions than they are by sound and consistent principles of literal interpretation.

For instance, Fred Sanders has been open in his embrace of the canonical approach to hermeneutics popularized many years ago by Brevard Childs. Sanders writes: “the necessary first step of Trinitarian theology . . . arises from the totality of Scripture rather than a congeries of scattered texts.”⁵¹ Sanders adds: “every move toward accepting and interpreting the canon as a whole is a move toward the Trinity.”⁵² Sanders’ words initially sound enticing—after all, who wouldn’t want to “move toward the Trinity”? But what do Sanders’ words actually mean? Are they right? Are they founded on sound biblical exegesis? At minimum, Sanders’ approach is of questionable hermeneutical value.

Similar is the recent work of Robert B. Jamieson III and Tyler Wittman in *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis*.⁵³ In that work, Jamieson and Wittman have opined that “a right reading of Scripture requires more theology than many are willing to grant. Because they are distilled from a right reading of Scripture, classical doctrines about Christ and the Trinity constitute a well-stocked keychain that can open up exegetical doors that would otherwise remain shut in the face of modern exegetical conventions.”⁵⁴ Again, this language initially sounds inviting, but it begs the question: are the “doors” Jamieson and Wittman referring to “doors” we should be opening, if those “doors” cannot be opened through the normal, consistent, and plain reading of Scripture?⁵⁵ The “Trinitarian exegesis” championed by Jamieson and Wittman is in the vein of the “theological interpretation of Scripture” method of hermeneutics popularized in recent years by Kevin Vanhoozer, Scott R. Swain, and others.⁵⁶

reveals himself to his creation.” Keith S. Whitfield, ed., *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Application* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 178.

⁵¹ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (New Studies in Dogmatics) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 104.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Robert B. Jamieson III and Tyler Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁵⁵ Also, it is interesting to note that Jamieson and Wittman have claimed that, as they develop their Christological-Trinitarian exegetical method, they will “receive much help from learned, contemporary, historically minded biblical scholarship.” *Ibid.*, 21. Again, though, as one reads through the entirety of their book, not a single dispensational scholar—no matter how “learned, contemporary, [or] historically minded” they might be—is cited. Further, not one dispensational scholar is mentioned in the book’s bibliography of works consulted.

⁵⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre

While the idea of “Trinitarian exegesis” initially might sound right—after all, as Christians we both affirm the Trinity and affirm the importance of sound exegesis—in reality, this hermeneutical method flips the concept of biblical hermeneutics on its head.

Long ago, Bernard Ramm noted: “The Scriptures themselves are the divine disclosure. From *them* is to be derived our system of theology. We can only know the truth of God by a correct exegesis of Scripture. Therefore exegesis is *prior to* any system of theology.”⁵⁷ Ramm continued: “The historic Protestant position is to ground theology in Biblical exegesis. A theological system is to be built up exegetically brick by brick. Hence the theology is no better than the exegesis that underlies it. The task of the *systematic* theologian is to commence with these bricks ascertained through exegesis, and build the temple of his theological system. But only when he is sure of his individual bricks is he able to make the necessary generalizations, and to carry on the synthetic and creative activity that is necessary for the construction of a theological system.”⁵⁸ Last, Ramm gave this warning: “The great doctrines of the faith should be those which can be determined by the literal approach to the meaning of Scripture. A theology which ignores this *control* could well bring us back to the confused labyrinth of so much patristic and medieval exegesis.”⁵⁹

This is where dispensationalism—and specifically, dispensational hermeneutics—comes in. Rather than engaging in Trinitarian exegesis or canonical hermeneutics or theological interpretation of Scripture, dispensationalism is committed to the “brick-by-brick” form of hermeneutics and exegesis which Ramm commended. This is because dispensationalism is, fundamentally, a hermeneutics-driven approach to understanding the Bible. And not just any form of hermeneutics, but a consistent literal, historical, grammatical form of hermeneutics.

Charles C. Ryrie stated many years ago that dispensationalism is committed to the “consistent employment of normal or plain interpretation [of Scripture].”⁶⁰ Craig A. Blaising and

Dame Press, 2008); Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Cascade Companions) (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010); Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011). According to Swain, this “[r]ecent work on Scripture and hermeneutics rightly locates the Bible and its interpretation within a Trinitarian economy of revelation.” Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 10.

⁵⁷ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1970), 168 (emphasis added).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 169 (emphasis in original). This is not to contradict what Robert Lightner posited when he said: “Evangelical Christians believe in the doctrine of the triune God because of the teaching of Scripture as a whole and not because of one particular passage of Scripture.” Robert P. Lightner, *The God of the Bible and Other Gods* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 1998), 90. Lightner was not disagreeing here with Ramm’s statements about building theology upon a foundation of brick-by-brick exegesis. Rather, Lightner here was simply identifying the fact that there is no single proof-text in Scripture for the Trinity.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 167 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 47.

Darrell L. Bock have noted that a “*sine qua non* of dispensationalism” is “the consistent practice of literal hermeneutics. Literal here is not opposed to figurative but rather to allegorical or spiritual. The terms normal or plain may be used in place of literal, since it is the interpretation according to the normal use of language.”⁶¹ Renald Showers has highlighted as an “indispensable factor” of dispensationalism “the consistent use of a single hermeneutic (a single method of interpreting the Bible)—namely, the historical-grammatical method. In this method, words are given the common, ordinary meaning which they had in the culture and time in which the passage was written.”⁶² While in recent years the re-phrasing⁶³ and the clarification⁶⁴ of certain

⁶¹ Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 26. David Mappes and H. Wayne House, “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 17 (2013), 8-9 (“Rather than re-interpret the OT or practice a complementary hermeneutic, traditional dispensationalists seek to understand the literal meaning of a text by its immediate historical-textual parameters . . . This system of interpretation allows the immediate historical context of a passage to define and limit textual meaning.”) (emphasis in original); Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, “Introduction to Covenant and Dispensational Theologies,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 15 (“One of the hallmarks of a more traditional dispensational view involves hermeneutics. This form of dispensationalism affirms a strict literal hermeneutic that focuses on the human author’s intent within the historical context.”).

⁶² Renald Showers, *There Really Is a Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 53. Showers continued this thought by contrasting covenant theology, which “employs a double hermeneutic – the historical-grammatical method for many passages but also the allegorical or spiritualizing method for a number of prophetic passages dealing with the future of Israel and the future Kingdom of God. By contrast, Dispensational Theology is convinced that the historical-grammatical method should be employed for all of Scripture, including those prophetic passages related to Israel and the Kingdom of God.” Ibid.

⁶³ For instance, Mark Snoeberger has openly “departed from all three of the adjectives that Ryrie selected to describe the dispensational hermeneutic (‘literal,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘plain’),” and instead has “opted for what I believe is a more accurate one, namely, *originalist*.” Mark A. Snoeberger, “Traditional Dispensationalism,” in Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 153 (emphasis in original). Snoeberger continues: “An originalist method of hermeneutics holds that interpretation of texts be carried out with ‘strict intentionalism’ that ‘accords binding authority’ to the ‘intentions’ of a given document’s authors. The theory is a strictly foundationalist one that regards the meaning and referents of all propositional communication as fixed and impervious to emendation.” Ibid. Snoeberger goes on to note that traditional dispensationalists “argue that an originalist hermeneutic is axiomatic to the successful use of language, and that the very idea of a conversation about hermeneutics becomes impossible unless all parties to the conversation agree, explicitly or implicitly, to abide necessarily by the principles of originalistic hermeneutics . . . Originalism is first among the received laws of language, and failure to observe this precept results inevitably in the loss of successful communication.” Ibid., 154.

⁶⁴ According to Michael J. Vlach, a hallmark of dispensational hermeneutics is not as much “literal” versus “spiritual” interpretation as much as it is a matter of “testament priority.” Vlach writes:

“The main difference between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists on the matter of hermeneutics is not simply ‘literal’ versus ‘spiritual’ interpretation, but how each camp views the relationship between the two testaments. As Herbert Bateman puts it, the central issue is ‘testament priority.’ Testament priority is ‘a presuppositional preference of one testament over the other that determines a person’s literal historical-grammatical hermeneutical starting point.’ An interpreter’s testament-priority assumptions are especially significant when interpreting how New Testament authors use the Old Testament. Dispensationalists want to maintain a reference point for meaning in the Old Testament. They desire to give justice to the original authorial intent of the

hermeneutical definitions has been offered by more modern dispensational scholars, the same core hermeneutical commitments (traced back to men like Ryrie) remain.

The process by which one would apply the basics of dispensational hermeneutics with the aim of arriving at a sound and orthodox Trinitarian theology is rather straightforward:

- (1) Study and engage with individual Old Testament and New Testament texts, according to their unique historical-grammatical-literary contexts.
- (2) If and when a theological principle is extracted—here, on the subject of the Trinity—measure that principle against other individual passages of Scripture.⁶⁵
- (3) Once all Scriptures on the subject (of the Trinity) have been properly exegeted and weighed against each other, compile the truths they communicate in systematic fashion.⁶⁶
- (4) Measure systematic compilation of Trinitarian truths (derived from biblical exegesis governed by consistent application of literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutics) against the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed to ensure no departure from Trinitarian orthodoxy. If there is a conflict between the creed and Scripture, Scripture prevails.

Note what is *not* involved in this process of developing a Trinitarian theology through the application of dispensational hermeneutics: tradition, human reason, worldly philosophy, cultural

Old Testament writers as discovered by historical-grammatical hermeneutics. Nondispensationalists, on the other hand, emphasize the New Testament as their reference point for understanding the Old Testament. In other words, they start with the New Testament to understand the Old Testament. Feinberg explains the difference: ‘Nondispensationalists begin with NT teaching as having priority and then go back to the OT. Dispensationalists often begin with the OT, but wherever they begin they demand that the OT be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT.’ Thus, nondispensationalists start with the New Testament to understand Old Testament prophetic passages. And the New Testament is the lens for viewing the Old Testament.”

Michael J. Vlach, “What is Dispensationalism?,” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer* (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2012), 23 (citing Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 38) (also citing John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 75.).

⁶⁵ This part of the process involves recognizing that “Scripture shines light on other Scripture, but God intends for each portion of Scripture to contribute to His revelation.” Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 110.

⁶⁶ Robertson McQuilkin is helpful on this last point. He writes: a “good theologian is one who has taken into account all revealed truth about God and has related each part to a consistent whole . . . A specific doctrine or theme must be related to all other teaching that might affect that particular doctrine. In this way, the various areas of doctrine are combined into what might be called a systematic theology.” *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 220, 230, 232.

phenomena, the works of other theologians (whether dispensational, covenantal, Anglican, Orthodox, or Roman Catholic), or even the church fathers. Note also the ordering of this process, which reverses the order by which many today who are pursuing Trinitarian “retrieval” (and in doing so citing the “Great Tradition”) would proceed. With a dispensational approach to hermeneutics, the tail does not wag the dog. The Scriptures remain preeminent in the study of the Trinity.

HONEST CONCERNS

Not only does a dispensational hermeneutical approach to the study of the Trinity follow the right process (in terms of prioritizing Scripture over tradition), it will necessarily lead to right results, since Scripture, rightly handled, “cannot be broken” (John 10:35). One of the ways the application of dispensational hermeneutics will do so is by ruling out the existence of the so-called “covenant of redemption” from modern Trinitarian dialogue.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth analysis of covenant theology’s conception of the so-called “covenant of redemption,” it is important to note that many of the Trinitarian scholars who have been given a voice in the modern-day quest for theological “retrieval” also hold to some form of covenant theology, and affirm, in particular, the existence of a supposed pre-temporal “covenant of redemption” between two of the three Persons of the Trinity—God the Father and God the Son. For instance, John Owen wrote of his beliefs in the covenant of redemption.⁶⁷ Charles Hodge embraced the covenant of redemption in his work on systematic theology.⁶⁸ Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain devote an entire, prominently-placed chapter to the covenant of redemption in their work on Christian dogmatics.⁶⁹ J.V. Fesko has written an entire monograph on the covenant of redemption.⁷⁰

Of particular note, though, is Matthew Barrett, who has gained widespread influence and a significant mainstream following in recent years in bringing deep topics related to the doctrine of God—including the attributes of God⁷¹ and the Trinity⁷²—to more popular, lay-level

⁶⁷ John Owen, *Works of John Owen*, vol. 12 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 501 (“The first thing, then, is manifest, that there was a voluntary concurrence and distinct consent of the Father and Son for the accomplishment of the work of our peace, and for bringing us to God.”).

⁶⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979 repr.), 359-362.

⁶⁹ Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 107-125.

⁷⁰ J.V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); J.V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2016); J.V. Fesko, “The Covenant of Redemption and the *Ordo Salutis*,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 33/1 (Spring 2022), 5-19.

⁷¹ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019).

⁷² Barrett, *Simply Trinity*.

audiences. And, as one of today's more highly-respected and published Trinitarian theologians, Barrett is very open about his embrace of the covenant of redemption. He writes, in *Simply Trinity*:

“When Paul, in Ephesians 1 and 2 Thessalonians 2, takes us back to eternity to reassure believers that their salvation was predestined in eternity by none other than the triune God himself, he assumes what theologians have called the *covenant of redemption* or the *pactum salutis*. Unlike many other covenants in the Bible that are between God and his people (Abraham, Moses, etc.), the covenant of redemption is between the persons of the Trinity. In other words, it is intratrinitarian, and since our triune God is timelessly eternal, so too must be the covenant of redemption . . .”

“What occurs in this intratrinitarian covenant? The Son enters into a covenant with the Father to be Mediator of God's people. The Son brings the covenant to fruition by means of his incarnation. Hence it is the covenant of redemption, the *Son*, our covenant surety, fulfilling the covenant by redeeming sinners by his own blood (Eph. 1:7). Far from some cold contract, the Son voluntarily accepts the stipulation of the covenant out of his love for the Father. John Owen says the covenant of redemption is that ‘compact, covenant, convention, or agreement, that was between the Father and the Son, for the accomplishment of the work of our redemption by the mediation of Christ, to the praise of the glorious grace of God’ . . .”

“The covenant of redemption is a fundamental pillar of Reformed orthodoxy. As Richard Muller explains, ‘it is a pretemporal, intra-trinitarian agreement of the Father and the Son concerning the covenant of grace and its ratification in and through the work of the Son incarnate. In the unity of the Godhead, the Son covenants with the Father to be the temporal sponsor of the Father's *testamentum* in and through the work of the Mediator’ . . .”

“The covenant of redemption is spectacular because it puts our redemption within its organic, trinitarian context.”⁷³

In response to Barrett, a few things are worth noting.

First, Barrett is not qualified to say that Paul—an apostle of Jesus Christ who was moved by the Holy Spirit as he penned Holy Scripture—“assumes what theologians have called the *covenant of redemption* or the *pactum salutis*.” No theologian or scholar, no matter how brilliant and insightful he might be, can credibly claim to know what an inspired apostle “assumed,” or to suggest that what an apostle “assumed” was a theological construct (such as the covenant of redemption) that would not be invented until many centuries later.

Second, Barrett does not refer to or appeal to Scripture in making his case for the covenant of redemption. The one Scripture he does cite (Ephesians 1:7) is a reference to Christ

⁷³ Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 305-307.

redeeming sinners by His blood—a biblical truth that both those who affirm and reject the covenant of redemption would agree with and claim. Barrett not only does not appeal to Scripture, he cannot do so, and he cannot do so because the covenant of redemption is an extra-biblical theological covenant. While it fits within the extra-biblical framework that has been developed by covenant theologians over the centuries, it is not found on the pages of Scripture.

Third, Barrett’s embrace of and advocacy for the covenant of redemption is ironic, given that his focus in *Simply Trinity* is fighting against what he calls “Trinity drift,” and pushing for a return to the original Nicene sources to regain (or “retrieve”) Nicene trinitarian orthodoxy. The irony associated with Barrett’s approach is in his willingness to assume the existence of a covenant of redemption between God the Father and God the Son, though it is nowhere revealed on the pages of Scripture, and though the term was not coined until well over a thousand years after the very period (i.e., that of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople) that Barrett is focused on “retrieving.” That is to say, though he is a theologian who is rightly focused on a commitment to a “retrieval” of Nicene orthodoxy, the way in which he gets there—by embracing a non-Nicene theological construct (i.e., the covenant of redemption)—is suspect.

Beyond the fact that its adherents are being inconsistent in both desiring to “retrieve Nicaea” while embracing a post-Nicene construct such as the covenant of redemption, why else would a Trinity-minded dispensational scholar be concerned about mixing the covenant of redemption (or *pactum salutis*) in with Nicene orthodoxy? The answer is quite simple: not only is the covenant of redemption not found in Scripture, and therefore not exegetically supportable, it is theologically problematic from the standpoint of Trinitarian orthodoxy.

First, a “covenant” (whether biblical or theological) is a meeting of the minds, and an aligning of the wills. When two parties “covenant,” they are agreeing and aligning on whichever terms they have agreed to. What this presumes, however, is that before covenanting, these parties were not in agreement or in alignment. What the covenant of redemption does, then, is suggest that there was a time at which God the Father and God the Son had separate wills. Not only that, this mode of thinking suggests mutability within the Godhead, as at least one of the parties to this covenant had to “change” to become aligned in will with the other party. These are highly problematic ideas, considering that the testimony of Scripture is that the members of the Godhead are of one will (John 6:38; John 10:30). Further, the testimony of Scripture is that God is immutable (Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8).

Second, as phrased by most covenant theologians, the “covenant of redemption” is not trinitarian, but instead is binitarian—as it is between God the Father and God the Son. Meaning, even if the issue of disparate wills between the Father and the Son were somehow cleared, there would still be the issue of the Holy Spirit not being a party to this covenant, which would violate the trinitarian principle of the inseparable operations of all three members of the Trinity.⁷⁴

On account of its exegetically-flimsy basis and its potential for Trinitarian pitfalls, not even all covenant theologians recognize the existence of a covenant of redemption. For instance,

⁷⁴ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 53 (noting that “the Holy Spirit tended to be left out of such a model.”).

O. Palmer Robertson, in his work *The Christ of the Covenants*, was unable to affirm the existence of a covenant of redemption. He wrote: “To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian ‘covenant’ with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.”⁷⁵ Robert Letham is another covenant theologian who has openly questioned the existence of a covenant of redemption.⁷⁶

Without a so-called “covenant of redemption” to point to, how would the application of dispensational principles of hermeneutics explain how the Triune God came about to redeem sinners? The answer is straightforward, and not because of dispensational hermeneutics *per se*, but rather because of the plain text and reading of Scripture (which a dispensational hermeneutic aspires to uphold): “we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11).

In other words, there is a singular decree of God—not multiple decrees,⁷⁷ and not a supposed “covenant” between members of the Trinity—whereby He brings everything to pass, including the redemption and salvation of sinners. No covenantal—or for that matter, dispensational—presuppositions need be rested upon in support of this conclusion. Instead, this conclusion is arrived at from a plain reading of the text.

To summarize, then, reliance upon the straightforward hermeneutical approach of dispensationalism ought to be a welcome addition to any efforts to “retrieve” orthodox Trinitarianism—not to in any way read “dispensationalism” (as a broader system) back into principles of Nicene orthodoxy, but instead because the consistent application of dispensational hermeneutics will lead to a Trinitarianism which more closely resembles that first articulated at Nicaea.

⁷⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1980), 54.

⁷⁶ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 401 (“By the same token, we point to the obedience of the incarnate Son in the economy of salvation, reflecting his eternal relation to the Father in loving submission, in identity of being and equality of status. The faithfulness of God also undercuts the suggestion made by Warfield—only a suggestion, for he does not pursue it—that certain aspects of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the history of salvation may have been due to a ‘covenant’ between the persons of the Trinity by which the Son submitted himself temporarily to the Father, intending to abandon such submission upon the completion of our salvation. If this were so, the Son could not have revealed God to us.”); see also Robert Letham, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012), 185-97.

⁷⁷ “God’s decree is His plan by means of which He has determined all things that relate to the universe, including His own actions toward it and all that comes to pass in it and of it . . . That God’s plan is one is indicated by the singular words, ‘purpose’ and ‘counsel.’” Floyd H. Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 69; see also Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 204 (“Nothing is outside the scope of God’s sovereign rule. Ephesians 1:11 emphasizes ‘all things’ are brought to pass by His decree. Because everything is encompassed in God’s sovereign plan it is sometimes spoken of in the singular—it is one decree.”).

HOPEFUL CHALLENGE

It is a historical fact that the city of Thyatira (the recipient of the fourth of Jesus' seven letters to the churches) was often overlooked, as travelers (and invaders) here sought instead to visit (or pillage) its larger and more significant neighbor—Pergamum.⁷⁸ There is a parallel between the popularity of Pergamum as a “stopping off point” (and the comparative unpopularity of Thyatira in this regard) and the methods of theological “retrieval” in which modern Trinitarian scholars are engaged. In the realm of modern-day Trinitarian scholarship, dispensationalists are a bit like Thyatira. Their Trinitarian contributions apparently are viewed as a destination not worth stopping off for, in terms of serious study and engagement. Instead, in our day, those who wish to do serious Trinitarian academic work look past the dispensationalists (Thyatira) to the bigger prize (Pergamum)—which has no dispensational theologians in its midst.

But this should not be so. Because of the hermeneutical distinctions and convictions to which they hold, dispensational scholars ought to be producing the best Trinitarian scholarship. Dispensational theologians have the same concerns and interests that non-dispensational Trinitarian scholars do, which is a robust commitment to Nicene orthodoxy. Dispensational theologians recognize that Nicene formulations of the Trinity were rooted in the Scriptures, which is the chief concern of dispensational hermeneutics, as well. The landscape of existing Trinitarian scholarship by dispensational theologians is not littered with social trinitarianism, or other man-centered conceptions of the Triune God, as more modern scholars concerned with “Trinity drift” are writing against. Further, dispensationalists have the advantage of viewing the Trinity, as it is revealed in the Bible, without the added interpreted lens of extra-biblical covenants—such as the so-called “covenant of redemption.”

A final, and hopeful, challenge to those who hold to dispensational convictions—who are rightly concerned with upholding a consistent literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic—is this: to consider doing more serious academic work in the field of Trinitarianism, and not to cede this field of theological scholarship to non-dispensational theologians. Much of use to biblical Trinitarianism has already been offered by dispensational scholars, and much more can still be offered.

⁷⁸ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 206; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 84-85.