ATS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE OF GOD AND "THE TRIUNE GOD"

JAN BARNA, PHD
NEWBOLD COLLEGE
United Kingdom

Table of Contents

(1) The Historical and Methodological Challenge of Defining the Triune God

The Seventh-day Adventist statements on Trinity, four altogether, are not the starting point of our confessional stance. By choosing to start with the Scripture article, we are breaking way from the traditional way of organising creedal confessions.

Historically, up to the time of the Second Helvetic Confession in 1566 (drawn up by Heinrich Bullinger with 30 articles) the church statements have always started with the reference to God and Trinity as the leading doctrine. There is a long discussion about what happens when statements start with the reference to Scripture or Trinity first. Nowadays many evangelical churches follow the non-traditional route while most historical churches follow the traditional one.[1]

The first obvious point therefore in front of us, a point arising directly from the sequence of how we start our fundamental beliefs statements, starting with the Scripture doctrine and only then moving to the Trinity is a significant one. The Trinitarian confession is not the first fundamental article in our confession. Is it significant that it is the doctrine of Scripture?[2]

---

[1] See a brief discussion on this in Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 93. The arguments against starting with the doctrine of Scripture try to demonstrate that an approach moving from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis essentially demonstrates a foundationalist approach to knowledge.

[2] The critics of this order point out that such a model exerts overconfidence in exegetical skills and human reason as it reads and interprets Scripture for the purpose of creating a perfect doctrinal system out of them. On the other hand, the Trinitarian proponents suggests that using the doctrine of Triune God as the first and orientational point in confessional statements suggests that we acknowledge that without knowing God first we don't know ourselves or anything about the world around us. "Starting with Scripture leads readers to the

In what I will set out to do in this paper, I will respect this sequence because I believe it is the key to how we go about approaching the subject of a/the Triune God.

The main concern of my paper is thus to address the topic of the Triune God initially from a methodological and hermeneutical perspective, raise fundamental questions of how we approach the subject, what language we utilise and what the basic biblical-methodological framework could look like to do justice to this topic.

Secondly, and as the consequence of the primary methodological discussion, I will try to indicate what theological definitions could look like when we allow a Biblical Theology approach to shape our language, structure and content regarding the theme of God.

The subject as such undeniably has been one of the most challenging ones to properly define given the scriptural witness and the many layers of historical theology that come with it. It will be appropriate to begin by trying to provide a succinct overview of the historical-dogmatic challenge.

(1.1) The Historical-Dogmatic Challenge

Historically speaking several relevant approaches emerged to the specific subject of the Triune God. I will mention three which are relevant for our considerations and also for ongoing discussions within Adventism on Trinity. The first historical-theological model that emerged could be termed "Economic Trinity".

A. The Economic View of the Trinity

The economic view of the Trinity is based on the notion of "economy of salvation" which highlights God's self-revelation in the salvation history. The relationships within the Godhead

---

overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth…it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason" D. A. Carson and Tim Keller, *Gospel-Centered Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 6.

are understood to be based on the ways the triad were manifested in creation and redemption. Each person is responsible for an aspect of the economy of salvation. The main representatives of this approach are **Irenaeus, Hippolytus** and **Tertullian**. There was an attempt to explore the inner relations among the three persons in Godhead, but the main attention was on the ways in which the Trinity was revealed in the process of redemption.

In Irenaeus' view the whole process of salvation, from its beginning to its end, bore witness to the action of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, because They are mentioned at different stages of the redemption drama as playing key roles. Irenaeus started to use the term "economy of salvation" meaning "the way in which God has ordered the salvation of humanity in history".

In Tertullian's view, there are three manifestations of one God. God was manifested in different stages of the redemption history differently. Sometimes He was manifested as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit. Although there are three manifestations, they are numerically distinct; they are nonetheless manifestations of a single indivisible power. There is a distinction (*distinctio*) or distribution (*dispositio*), but not division or separation (*separatio*). Famously Tertullian uses examples of root and its shoot, source and its river, or the sun and its light as illustrations of the unity within the Godhead. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one identical substance; this substance has been extended into three manifestations, yet not divided. The Western church owns its Trinity vocabulary by Tertullian and also a dialectical approach to the understanding of Trinity, three and yet one, distinct and yet not divided.

In summary, the Triune God in the economic view is defined on the basis of God's self-revelation in the process of salvation. It is not based on the internal relations among the persons in the Triad. Yet, we also need to say that the approach is not immune from dialectic and hence speculative language.

B. The Subordinationist View of the Trinity

A somewhat different approach to the Trinity doctrine appeared in the form of *Logos Christology*. In the 2nd century the dominant neo-Stoic and neo-Platonic ideas deflected Christian thought into subordinationist channels, and produced what is known as the *Logos-Christology*. This looks upon the Son as subordinated to the Father and the Holy Spirit subordinated to the Son. The Logos Christology is based on functional subordination not substantial though. Origen as the father of the subordination theory, refers to Jesus as "Deuteros Theos," meaning that the Son is second in rank, subordinate God to the Father.

Based on Plotinus' neo-platonic philosophy which became extremely popular in the early Christian centuries, God is an indivisible being and hence there could not be two of them. Origen was happy to follow the neo-Platonic logic which led him to suggest that Jesus as the Logos must be subordinated to the Father functionally, just like Logos was the self-revelation of the One God in this Greek philosophy.

Origen's and also Clements's ideas were eventually overtaken and rejected by the later confessions, yet it is interesting that functional subordination theories have not died a full death, but were surprisingly resurrected within Evangelical quarters and even found their ways into the Adventist discussions on the Trinity.

The third historical-theological approach to defining Trinity can be called Internal Trinity and it's best visible in Augustine's work.

C. Augustine's Ontological Speculative Trinity

Augustine's theology of the Trinity is based on defining the ontological relations among the members of the Godhead. Augustine regards all three persons of the Godhead as co-equal and rejects any form of subordination. Thus, his Trinity can be referred to as the *Essential Trinity*, grounded in God's eternal nature. The earlier concept of the *Economic Trinity* was grounded in God's self-revelation in history and in the economy of salvation.

Augustine employs different analogies to understand the relationships within the Trinity. Sometimes these analogies are referred to as "psychological analogies" because he looks for analogies within the human mind as the apex of humanity which was created in God's image.

God has left a characteristic imprint of Himself upon creation and Augustine discerns a triadic structure in the human thought process, because it involves the mind, knowledge and love or sometimes he identifies memory, understanding and will. The three faculties of human mind are inextricably linked, yet separate in their function and operation. Each has its proper name. They are each a distinct aspect of human nature. However, when it comes to their function and operation, they are inseparable. If one is at work, so are the others. We cannot think of any of these three apart from also recalling to mind the other two.

Thus, Augustine's conclusion is that if within the created order, indeed within humanity itself, we have instances of realities both separate and inseparable we should "believe that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit may be exhibited separately, by certain visible symbols, by certain forms borrowed from creatures, and still in their operations be inseparable."[3]

D. The Normative Statement of Constantinople 381

What did the church do officially with these approaches? A definitive and normative statement emerged in the year 381 at the council of Constantinople. The formula which expresses the position of the church is that the Triune God can be perceived as "*one uosia in three hypostaseis*". In other words, one being/existence in three "foundations". The emphasis often is on the latter part of the formula, on the separate existence of three persons, rather than on the indivisibility of the Godhead. The one Godhead exists simultaneously in three modes of being or hypostases. The idea of "co-inherence" later referred to as "perichoreis,"

---

[3] Christopher Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, 99.

meaning mutual interpenetration of the persons is emphasised. [4] The Godhead exists "undivided in divided persons". There is an "identity of natures" in three hypostases.

This formulation, including its highly dialectic language and speculative ontological approach became the blueprint for later confessions. The contributions of the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine then settles the discussion for the next 500 years. Thus by the 5th century the doctrine is more or less defined.

During the second half of the first Millennium "Boetius (cca 525) and others like him tended to make greater use of speculation"[5] because philosophy and theology were combined in one method. Indeed, at the height of scholasticism for people like Aquinas, the doctrine of Trinity provided a "wonderful grist for the philosophical-speculative mill."[6]

The later controversies focused on defining terms like *persona* and *filioque*. Aquinas's emphasis on multiplicity of "persons" rather than unity (traditional Augustinian and Anselmian emphasis) caused additional tensions between the West and the East. The Second Council of Lyons which met in 1274 was a mediatory attempt to please both sides on the issue of the

---

[4] The idea of *perichoreis* was developed alongside the idea of *appropriation* to expand on the internal existence of the Godhead. The idea of *perichoreis* is that each person while maintaining its distinctive identity penetrates the others and is penetrated by them. Each person shares in the life of the other two. The Trinity is therefore like a "community of being". Individuality of the person is maintained but the ontological sharing of life is stressed at the same time. *Appropriation* clarified the functional roles of the persons of Trinity. The concept of appropriation is built on two steps. 1. The works of the Trinity (persons of Trinity) are a unity. Every person of the Trinity is involved in every action of the Godhead. For example, the work of creation is not the work of the Father alone, but all persons of the Godhead were involved in the work of creation. 2. The second step however insists that despite the fact that all three persons of the Godhead are involved in every action of the Godhead yet *it is appropriate* to think of the work of creation as the distinctive action of one person of the Godhead – the Father. On one hand, every person of the Trinity is involved in every act of the Godhead on the other hand the different acts of the Godhead appear to be distinctive acts of not all three persons of the Godhead, but only one person at a time.

[5] Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2002), 51.

[6] Ibid., 54.

Trinity. It uses the language of *filioque* but still defines the Holy Spirit as proceeding not from two principles (the Father and the Son), which the word *filioque* normally implied, but only from one. Both the West and the East could live using such statement regardless of the merit of what the statement actually was saying about God, the Son and the Spirit and their relations.[7]

However, the 381 formulation, including its language and dialogical manner remained the core for later confessions, including Protestant ones. Thus, what the church effectively came to confess can be summarised as follows:

> So that there are not three Gods, but three persons, consubstantial, coeternal, and coequal; distinct, as touching their persons; and, in order, one going before another, yet without any inequality. For, as touching their nature or essence, they are so joined together that they are but one God; and the divine essence is common to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[8]

The Seventh-day Adventist official definitions which we'll look at a little later definitely follow the first historical approach of the Economic view of Trinity staying away from the speculative Internal Trinity model which became predominant later. However, even in our confession the dialogical manner of the 381 confession remains.

E. The Challenge of the Greek Language and Logic

The language of God in the early creeds is however a concern that I'd like to raise at this stage. The early patristic fathers have characterised God using language and terms which were borrowed from and influenced by Greek Platonic and neo-Platonic conceptions. Even

---

[7] Ibid., 65. The text of the council reads: "We profess faithfully and devotedly that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son, not as from two principles, but as from one principle; not by two spirations, but by one single spiration".

[8] The Second Helvetic Confession, 1566, Article 3 - God is Three.

the very manner of using dialectic logic as a means to explain God's Triune nature is based on the Greek model of thinking. As I see it, this is a major problem in Christian dogmatics of a/the Triune God.

While the Hellenistic language and logic may have been helpful for the church to communicate the truths about God to converts from the Greek culture, in the long run, it stored up problems for the church. None the least because the Bible was not written with the Greek mode of thinking and language in mind, but with the Hebraic one, which is far less dialectical.

In this regard, Geoffrey Wainwright notes that the 325 and 381 councils indeed provide a

> more precise phraseology, drawing *transformatively* upon Greek ontology to achieve *a sharper* statement of what was to be taught and believed concerning the being, character, action, and purpose of God.[9]

The word "transformatively" is very illuminative here, because it demonstrates that there was indeed a transformation to achieve "sharper statements" regarding God. Of course, the fact that such phraseological change was based on Greek ontology is worrying to say the least. Even a liberal scholar like Adolf von Harnack became concerned about the development which he saw as completely hijacking the Hebraic mode of thinking.[10]

F. Where to Go From the Past?

With regards to the dialectic nature and language of the classical formulations - thee yet one, separate yet inseparable, three persons but one existence, what do we say? Did the creeds

---

[9] Geoffrey Wainwright, 'Trinity,' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible,* gen. ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (London: SPCK and Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 815. Italics mine.

[10] See Adolf von Harnack, History of Dogma (volumes 1-7).

simply utilise a useful Hellenistic tool of logic and then follow on with it? Should the language have gone into such detail? If we borrow language and conceptual tools from the Hellenistic context, don't we also borrow with it its ontology? Is language neutral? Shall we accept these as indeed dogmatically normative or at best instructive in how to fashion a biblical concept of the Triune God? Or should we try to put them aside, as much as it is possible (even though there is no such thing as a fresh start in theology) and look at what the biblical theme of God would look like as constructed from and based on the inner logic and language of the biblical material?

I believe the historical-dogmatic challenge invites us to bravely look for a fresh biblical approach, one that would enable us to hear the Scripture's witness and its story of God on its own terms and not on the terms of somebody else's philosophical ideas. It is however a major challenge.

(1.2) The Methodological Challenge

'Methodology,' says Michael Bird in his *Evangelical Theology*, 'is a genuinely important element of Christian Theology. Methodology is a net, and it catches what it is made to catch. *How* you can decide to do theology will inevitably impact *what kind* of theology that you come up with.'[11]

In terms of how we get into the subject of the Triune God in Scripture at least two major approaches have historically emerged. One could be called the theological interpretation or rule of faith model (*regula fidei*) of reading the Scripture. The second approach could be referred to as historical-exegetical, a big umbrella under which a range of exegetical and

---

[11] Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 77.

hermeneutical proposals could be fitted. I will briefly explain the two and then give you my reasons for rejecting both and instead proposing another way of approaching the subject.

A. The Theological Interpretation Model

Approach one, the theological interpretation of Scripture as it especially became known in the past few decades is essentially the old way of interpreting the Scripture through the ecclesiastically derived rule of faith, especially through the Trinitarian and Christological creeds of the 4th century.

For example, Don Collett from Trinity School for Ministry (Ambridge, PA) in 'Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture'[12] argues for such a model. The Trinitarian hermeneutics is derived by the church in the form of the rule of faith. The logic of the Trinitarian reading is based on theological and ontological claims of the Scripture itself, especially in the accounts of incarnation and Pentecost. For him the key for Scripture's unity is the rule of faith and its implied Trinitarian logic. He says that: "the *theological* coherence between the Testaments …is expressed *hermeneutically* in a trinitarian rule of faith."[13]

The core of this argument is that the incarnation of Jesus and his claims about who he is are ontological claims. They need to be read then on the same level as the Old Testament ontological statements about God and hence the New Testament adds to them by suggesting that there is more to God then just one divine *persona*. This logic is extended to

---

[12] Available at < http://www.tsm.edu/team/the-rev-dr-don-collett/> (Accessed 19 August 2016).

[13] Ibid., 13. Collett adds: "Thus to reject a trinitarian rule of faith for reading Scripture is not merely to reject the dogmatic traditions of the church, but to reject both the continuing authority of the Old Testament for the church and the trinitarian rule of faith it authorizes, thereby *radically* undermining the theological and ontological logic uniting the two testaments," 14-15.

the Pentecost and the Spirit too, adding a Trinitarian theological hermeneutics to the Old Testament.

Among some of the seminal thinkers, Karl Barth, Jens Zimmermann and Brevard Childs follow a similar argument.[14] Among modern Evangelical theologians, for example, Michael Bird suggests that reading the Bible with a "cloud of witness" is the right approach as opposed to naïve Biblicism.[15] Brevard Child's approach while it may be more nuanced and careful in its language than Birds' still can be characterized as a *theological* exegesis in the canonical context behind which there is a Trinitarian hermeneutical model from the outset.[16]

Interestingly, proponents of the theological interpretation refer to such an approach as *the plain sense* of the text as opposed to the *literal sense*. The plain sense means that Scripture should be naturally read through rule of faith which is Trinitarian. Such reading then constitutes the plain sense of the text.[17]

Without engaging thoroughly with the position at this point, I would just like to add that this position has *a very optimistic understanding of the early Christian dogmatic statements*. They see the so called rule of faith being solely based on the Scripture's theological and

---

[14] Barth's *Church Dogmatics* has threefold structure of the Divine self-revelation corresponds to the Triune God's being. Also Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) and for example Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in H. Donner (ed.), *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie. Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 80-93.

[15] Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 78.

[16] See for example: Xun, C., *Theological Exegesis in the Canonical Context: Brevard Springs Childs's Methodology of Biblical Theology* (Studies in Biblical Literature, 137; New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

[17] See Kathryn Greene-McCreight on *literal sense* in *The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation* (ed. K. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 455-56 and also Collett, "Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture," 14. The *literal sense* for them is on the other hand linked with the historical sense which they reject as insufficient.

ontological claims about God and Christ. This means that the reading of Scripture through the rule of faith and following theological interpretation is not an appeal to the authority of the church, but to Scripture itself.[18]

So the first answer to how we methodologically approach the subject of the Triune God is that we take seriously the horizon of the Trinitarian *regula fidei* which captured the ontological claims of both the Old and the New Testaments and then re-read the Bible through Trinitarian hermeneutics. We take the view of a/the Triune God for granted from the outset, because such a view is given to us by the rule of faith. So we organise our confessional stance by starting out with the Trinitarian statement.[19]

The argument is that the Scripture lends itself to be read this way, because its nature is based on Trinitarian ontological claims. Thus what the church came up with in the 4th century is a very useful summary which becomes effectively a normative interpretative blueprint which the later generations need to follow in their reading of the Biblical texts regarding God.

_____

[18] Collett, "Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture,**"** 14. Collett sums up his case by saying: "[I]t should be also noted that the trinitarian rule of faith which emerges from this reading is *not* grounded in an appeal to the authority of the church, but in an appeal to the continuing authority of the Old Testament for the church, for the rule of faith has no independent integrity from Scripture, but necessarily derives from the need to do justice to the ontological and theological claims of Israel's scriptures in light of Christ." Many however may see this as an overly optimistic assessment of the rule of faith given the Hellenized controversies context within which the statements were developed. In many ways Collett's article is undermining the hermeneutical difficulties and elevating the positivist solution it offers for rule of faith as simply a construct of Scripture with no philosophical attachments behind.

[19] In Adventism, for example Rolf Pöhler has recently advocated a Trinitarian structure as the basis for organizing the Seventh-day Adventist confessional articles of faith. Interestingly the argument why such a move would be appropriate is that "[a]ncient Christian creeds are characterised by a Trinitarian structure." This illustrates that positive estimations of the rule of faith theological perspective model are not strange to Adventist thought either. See Rolf J. Pöhler, "Fundamental Beliefs; Curse or Blessing? – On the Pros and Cons of Adventist Confessional Statements" in *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Proceedings of the European Theology Teachers' Convention Newbold College of Higher Education 25-28 March 2015,* ed. Jean-Claude Verrecchia, (Bracknell, UK: Newbold Academic Press, 2016) 136 (123-148).

B. The Exegetical Model

In contrast, another approach suggests that it is by pure exegetical endeavour that we can get to the proper historical and theologically unbiased understanding of how the people in the Scripture saw and defined God. For example, Peter Enns, as a proponent of this model has argued for a need to use "methods and traditions of first-century Palestine" to explain the apostolic witness about Jesus and God.[20] Thus objective exegetical methodology scrutinizing the texts speaking about God, Christ or the Spirit should determine their theological value and not a later dogmatic summary of the Church.

Historically, in the age of the Enlightenment's scientific optimism it was the famous J. P. Gabler's 1787 Altdorf address which established the anti-dogmatic agenda for modern understandings of what it means to practice scientific exegesis.[21] Gabler hoped to develop a method for biblical exegesis that would put an end to the speculative readings inherent in the church's dogmatic traditions and creeds. He set out to find a method that would place a critical or objective control upon the speculative excesses of traditional dogmatic interpretation.

Of course his vision was captured by many after him, and biblical studies has since developed highly technical interrogative methods applied to Biblical texts which were mostly historical in their nature and divorced from any early church's dogmatic stance. What especially became known as Historical-criticism captures the essence of this approach with

---

[20] Peter Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment," in *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 209.

[21] For an English translation of Gabler's 1787 address, see J. Sandys-Wunsch, and L. Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," SJT 33:2 (1980) 133-58.

its manifold methodologies which really served as interrogative practices applied to texts in order to push out the pure and original meaning.

I don't think I have to elaborate on this model more as it is a well-known one and one still being pursued in biblical studies.

Now, there is **another way beyond the first two** approaches that can enable one to enter through the gate of Scripture to the topic of the Triune God. It does not have to be through the given dogmatic stance of the church. It does not have to be through the historical, semantic and grammatical investigation of texts and their traditions. I am convinced, that it is not enough to just fall back into the safe and cosy church definitions, however carefully derived in the ecumenical creeds of the church, particularly those in the 4th century (325 Nicea and 381 Constantinople); and to re-read the biblical revelation about God in the Old and the New Testaments in their light - assuming that this provides a safe language and conceptual framework for creating unity and proper hermeneutic of God.

Equally I do argue in this paper that it is insufficient to just engage in the nitty-gritty, detailed exegetical, verbal, grammatical, semantic and literally analysis of Hebrew or Greek texts and then try to piece together the many pieces of the God puzzle. Reception history has so far I believe sufficiently demonstrated that such an approach does not guarantee that a coherent picture will emerge. In fact, the long history of historical-biblical exegesis has created more disunity in scriptural and theological subjects than unity.

Thus, given this, I will propose to you a methodological model of approaching the subject which could be termed as *a staged canonical-narrative model.* The contours of such an approach have only been emerging with greater clarity in the last 15 years, generally in the discipline called Biblical Theology - which I need to quickly add is not the same enterprise as Gabler suggested or the same as the Biblical Theology Movement of the 1940-60.

There is a lot of confusion about the precise meaning of the name but I will define it in my next section and propose how it could methodologically help us to derive the story of God from Scripture and then proceed to theological formulations of Triune God. I also hasten to add before I begin to elaborate on my proposition, that what follows is not derived from compiling different models or sub-models within Biblical Theology, but rather that it has been my personal journey within the discipline, working out its methodological contours and its potential from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective and at the same time from the perspective of a systematic theologian that constitutes the basis of what I will say. I have run many times back and forth through the entire canonical material in a structured wholistic narrative way to see what it will do for how we do theology. I count myself lucky to receive unusually thorough training in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic which does not make me blind to the need for thorough exegesis, but at the same time, I became fully convinced that the Scriptural material invites a reading that works on a larger meta-narrative level without which exegesis will not work well when isolated from this perspective.[22]

(2) The Need for the Biblical Theology Framework

So how could we then go about the task? I will firstly mention an essential interpretative principle which we need to keep in mind particularly when considering the topic of the Triune God. After that I will proceed to develop the specific Biblical Theology framework that I believe is still missing from our transition from exegetical to systematic conclusions.[23]

---

[22] One of the enlightening analyses of the methodological problem of defining the Triune God doctrine in Adventism is in Gunnar Pedersen, "The Trinitarian Issue in Seven-day Adventism," in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, eds. Paul Petersen and Rob McIver (Adelaide, Australia: Avondale Academic Press, 2014), 181-191. However, the whole volume within which the article occurs, is well-worth the attention.

[23] Fortman argues there was "*a gradual transition from an unformulated Biblical witness to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to a dogmatic formulation of a doctrine of the Triune God*" which started after the New Testament period. I think Fortman is right and we should acknowledge this from the outset and realize that the emergence of Triune God definitions

(2.1) The Scripture Principle

The essential principle to consider from the outset is the Scripture principle. What I mean by this is that the Bible is more than just a collection of 66 books. Instead it could and should be regarded as one Scripture. The notion of the Bible as Scripture has been in the past several centuries however overshadowed by Biblical scholarship which under the assumptions of modernity began to take apart the Bible books and passages until we were left with texts only, but no Scripture.

Several major analyses have drawn attention to this problem including Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1980) and more recently Michael Legaspi's *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (2011).

The Bible's nature is such that it invites to be read as one Scripture. In other words, the wholistic perspective in reading the Bible matters. The meaning of individual texts and passages is not independent of the major biblical themes within which individual texts appear. I think this is one of the most fundamental biblical principles and strangely it is also one of the most neglected ones, because for centuries theologians have been trained to read the Bible closely, take apart every single verse and the words in a sentence, and then we thought the work is done.

I find it extremely enlightening that Ellen White, as one of the founders of the Adventist movement, made a significant contribution regarding the Scripture principle point. In the most systematic section on interpretation she's ever written, she is proposing studying the Bible from the perspective of a coherent whole, looking at the individual texts and topics from the

---

started after the post-apostolic period. But that equally does not mean that Scripture does not contain the teaching be it in a less dogmatic form. See Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982) reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), xvi.

unifying perspective of a single narrative. She says that individual Bible texts are of infinitely greater value when they are viewed in their relation to the grand central thought. "Viewed in the light of this thought, every topic has a new significance," she claims.[24]

Similarly, Tom Wright has recently reminded the interpretative community that the Bible needs to be considered for what it is – a Scripture with a massive narrative structure and a story of astonishing consistency starting from the first book Genesis and ending in the last book of the Bible Revelation.[25]

The doctrine of Triune God is a good case study which demonstrates that unless we employ the Scripture principle we will not be quite able to have a biblical doctrine of Triune God. Without such overarching and unifying narrative perspective we will be left with the historical conclusions as the basis for how we read the individual texts about God. So the challenge starts with revisiting the task by making some fundamental decisions on the meta-level of biblical interpretation, particularly on the level of the nature of the Bible text. [26]

---

[24] Ellen G. White, *Education* (1903), 123-126.

[25] N. T. Wright, "Reading Paul, Thinking Scripture," in *Scriptures' Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics,* ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2008), 60-61.

[26] The principle that is closely related to the Scripture principle is that the sum of individual parts is larger than those parts taken together. This especially applies on the level of detailed textual evidence or the level of individual key stories about God. If we bring together major individual clues from the OT and NT about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the theology of worship of Jesus, Spirit and the Father we realise that their synthesis points far beyond themselves. A massively sharper, richer picture of God emerges than when we just read individual texts. Put differently, the "thus says the Lord" + "thus says the Lord" + "thus says the Lord" taken together is far greater than just one "thus says the Lord". This is a valid principle which emerges from the nature of the Bible being one Scripture and from the concept of progressive revelation. In this consideration individual texts are indeed pointing beyond themselves into a much fuller and richer images. As we progress through the Bible books from Genesis onwards many topics and themes get far greater clarity. We would need to have a specific proof-text model of interpretation not to recognise what we may call the direction principle in the Scripture. Appendix A provides a selection of most frequently used texts in the Bible in the Triune God debate.

(2.2) The "Story of God" Principle

This discussion leads us then to closely consider the next step in constructing the Triune God topic from the perspective of Biblical Theology. In the Scripture principle the overall shape and plot matters and I'd like to suggest that the overarching concern of that narrative is particularly about who God is. Not that He is, not His attributes, but His character. The Bible story, I'd like to argue, is a story about who God is in His character.

The clue is provided already in the plot of the first three chapters. Is the God who created a good creation really a good God or is He, as the serpent claims a selfish God who wants to use the creation for his service? One that does not deserve humanity's adoration? Every story, passage, chapter and book will be gradually unveiling the answers to this question.

From this angle, the key in the Triune God formulations becomes the perspective of God's character. I'd like to propose that we need to approach the topic from this core angle rather than from the ontological or philosophical, because the nature and the content of the Bible lends itself naturally to be approached from this perspective.

The question of the Triune God from the perspective of Biblical Theology is thus not the question of how the three relate to one and one to the notion of three-ness. Neither will it be what is the exact nature of the relations among the persons of one Godhead. While these questions have taken a centre stage in the history of the Christian debate about the Godhead, I find it unfortunate that the church has not taken a different route - that of God's character as it is been progressively developed in the Scripture. I would even claim that the three-one debate has been a major distraction from a far more core issue about God - namely that of His character.

Let me indicate therefore what I see in Scripture being developed regarding the theme of God. If we take the Scripture principle, meaning that the Bible presents a coherent, staged and progressively developed unifying narrative with a plot and resolution to it, then the core perspective that the Bible begins to develop from the very first chapters is that of who God is and what is He like. Is He like the cunning serpent suggests a deceitful, shadowy figure who is only concerned with subjugating His creation and serving His purposes, or is He selflessly and endlessly serving His creation? Is He trustworthy or One who plays games with us?

Chapter 3 of Genesis begins to raise the issue in significant terms. The serpent's attack is firmly fixated on the character of God. "You will not surely die. For *God knows* that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil".[27] The sneaking argument is that the serpent knows God who is anything like He is claiming to Adam and Eve. God, the serpent suggests, is not telling them the truth. He is deceiving them by keeping them unawares of their true nature and potential. The snake casts great doubts about God's motives, his actions and His character. He portrays God as the master of the matrix world who is keeping humanity as slaves. The serpent is offering Adam and Eve the way out of this bondage, the magical pill in the form of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

The implications of what the serpent says about God's character are far reaching. The reader, without knowing the rest of the Bible story, at this point, simply cannot know whether what the serpent says is true or not. Is God a good God who serves creation by giving it life as Genesis 1 and 2 says? Or, is He a God of deception and manipulation? Which one and crucially, how do you know at that point?

The issue is developed in the foregoing narrative more often indirectly then directly addressing the question of God's character. However, through the individual and varied

---

[27] Genesis 3:4b-5, emphasis mine (*New King James Version*).

stories about God and His dealings with His people and this world, the reader gets better acquainted with God and what His character is like.

There are only few major narratives that begin to readdress the serpent's question in a direct manner. One of these is the revelation God gives to Moses. "Now therefore, I pray, … show me now Your way, that I may know you…" (Exodus 33:13). When Moses is keen to see God, what he "sees" is that God is "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity…" (Exodus 34: 6b-7). This is a major revelation about God's character, one that will be later reflected in the Old Testament story several times (for example by Jonah). But is God really like he says? One can indeed begin to see the many Old Testament stories and dealings of God with humans as providing the illustrations and evidence that God is indeed like He said to Moses. Who God is, is indeed a major concern for the Bible.

The issue is further developed with extraordinary detail in Job 1-2, Ezekiel 28, Isaiah 14 and Rev 12. Job chapters 1 and 2 shows an image of the developing showdown between God and Satan with the central theme of who God is. The accusation is made against God and it involves his character. God is bribing his followers to serve Him, He is manipulating His creation into adoration and worship.

But just like in Genesis 3, we still do not have the full answer of who God really is. The accusations are made but the answer, is still in the making. Yes, God may present Himself in chapters 38-40 as an all-powerful and wise creator, but that does not necessarily suggest anything about his character. In fact, the spirit that appears to Eliphas in chapter 4, suggests that He is a distrustful God who looks down even at His angels, let alone human beings. It is impossible to please Him, yet He is asking for full obedience to Him, hence is He righteous? Clearly the questions about who God is are still far from settled in Job.

And this is interesting, because we sometimes think all the answers about who God is are clear from the beginning of the Bible. But they are not. There is a progressively developing picture of the Great Controversy in the Bible. Alongside with it a progressively developing story of WHO GOD IS in His character and actions.

Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14 show early glimpses of this plot, indeed at the very beginning of it. In this context it makes sense to see Genesis 3 as the time when the arguments were still raging and the plot being developed and deepened. This is still a stage where God grants lots of freedom to the serpent. Again, the point is, that the Genesis 3 narrative is understandable only with the background of the developing plot about God and accusations entertained around His character.

And so also in Job the image of the controversy involving God's character is still in progress and the accusations are more clearly worded. In all these Old Testament places we see a progressive development of the theme of the controversy surrounding God's character. At no stage in the Old Testament Biblical story is there a definitive answer to the questions raised.

It is only in the New Testament that we begin to see the unfolding of the answers about WHO God really is. The central claim of the Gospels becomes that in Jesus God Himself descended into human flesh to become readable, touchable and fully understandable in his dealings, actions and character. And so, it is in Jesus's life and death where the story provides the answer to the core questions raised in the Old Testament.

As John 1:18 crucially says: "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has 'exegeted' Him" for us. Jesus of Nazareth provides the full exegesis of God to us.

Similarly, the author of the sermon to Hebrews affirms that the revelation about God has reached its climax in Jesus who is "the express image of His Person." He and his actions provide the final word to us about God (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Revelation 12:7-12 indeed confirms what John and Hebrews says by showing that the great war about God has reached a climax after which the serpent with his accusations has been cast out of heaven, from the presence of God. He lost the argument over God's character. All of Heaven knows that and people on earth know it too, all those who know God through Jesus. The issue has been settled, as the text says, through "the blood of the Lamb". The serpent's time is now finite.

From this overarching perspective of Scripture, it is the character of God that takes the central theological stage. Every other issue involving God's nature or ontological relations among the persons of Godhead takes secondary role. The framework the Scripture appears to be addressing is the character of God issue. After all, what existentially matters for people is to turn to God for life. But they will not turn to a God they cannot trust, love and naturally adore. Well-defined ontological and dialectically worded definitions will not necessarily make people trust and love God.

In this sense, I find it interesting that Ellen White's Conflict of the Ages book series starts and ends with alluding to the core of the Genesis 3 controversy – God's character: "God is Love". What is in between those two statements, on some 4 thousand pages, is the story that demonstrates that God indeed is love.

What does this mean for how we should methodologically and theologically approach the doctrine of the Triune God? I suggest that we should perhaps take the route the Scripture takes to develop a well-rounded theology of God's character in the first place and within that go as far as the Biblical revelation allows us to define the unique nature of God as a loving Triune God. However, we should not be afraid to stop our formulations just short of speculation and rather stay on the safe ground of revelation. There are enough allusions to suggest that there is more to the divine nature than normal non-dialectic language can explain. But we should stop there. Otherwise this matter will become a source of unnecessary speculation and controversy distracting us from a far more central discussion.

(3) The Triune God Formulation in the Fundamental Beliefs

The current Seventh-day Adventist confession comprises of 4 specific articles which define the doctrine of Triune God. These are: Article 2, specifically addressing the doctrine of "Trinity" and then three articles devoted to each person of the Godhead: "The Father," "the Son," and "the Holy Spirit".[28]

Reading through these statements, and at the same time comparing them with the early creeds, we quickly discover that apart from the very first sentence they avoid the dialectic language of the traditional Trinitarian confessions and instead focus on the attributes of God.

The very first sentence reads: "There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons." This is really the only dialectic statement in the Adventist confession. One God yet in three Persons. It does indicate that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is committed to the belief in the Triune God, but - and this is important – it does in a very measured way. The Article does not take the route of elaborate dialectic language, but rather cautiously states that "[God] is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation."

I think this is methodologically significant because it indicates in clear terms that the church is not following a *regula fidei* theological interpretation approach, but is rather committed solely to the Bible's revelation about God.

In fact, the rest of the statements in the articles about God focus on what is revealed about God's attributes and actions. Given the discussion we had about the nature of Scripture and its plot, this is indeed very positive.

---

[28] See Appendix B.

Where perhaps the statements could benefit is if there was a sharper focus on the specific kind of narrative plot about God's character we have discussed. This could present the story of a good God and how He has gradually proved Himself to be love and worthy of human adoration. Such an overarching and focused statement would be close to the Scripture's native concerns about Godhead and would hermeneutically, biblically and theologically frame what is expressed in the other articles. It would give them the necessary Biblical Theological framework. There is indeed no elaborate attempt in the Fundamental Beliefs currently that would trace in an obvious way the story of God's character and would suggest that this is the key biblical-theological framework within which one should understand the Triune God confession.[29]

---

[29] One could argue that Article 8 of the Fundamental Beliefs "The Great Controversy" contains such an overarching theological framework. While it is true that Article 8 offers a specific theological framework for perhaps all the other articles, it only contains one sentence (the first) that refers to the character of God. It reads: "All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God." Apart from this, there is nothing that would expand on this key concern. Moreover, Article 8 is not textually linked with the Triune God Articles 2-5 hence it is not immediately obvious to the reader that these Articles about the Godhead should be read within this framework.

Appendix A

Bible verses traditionally used to refer to _The Trinity_ by Relevance

John 10:30 - I and [my] Father are one.

Matthew 28:19 - Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

1 Corinthians 8:6 - But to us [there is but] one God, the Father, of whom [are] all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom [are] all things, and we by him.

2 Corinthians 13:14 - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, [be] with you all.

Matthew 3:16-17 - And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him…

John 14:26 - But the Comforter, [which is] the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

John 1:14 - And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

1 John 5:7-8 - For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.

John 14:16-17 - And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever…

Colossians 2:9 - For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

Philippians 2:5-8 - Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus…

Genesis 1:26 - And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

John 1:1-51 - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

1 Peter 1:2 - Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.

Ephesians 4:4-6 - [There is] one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling…

2 Corinthians 1:21-22 - Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, [is] God…

Genesis 3:22 - And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us.

Beyond the specific texts, there is a new emerging consensus on early Jesus's high Christology, the idea that already the very early Jewish-Christian communities have regarded Jesus as sharing the divine status and honor with God. This is being proposed by Martin Hengel, Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado (Edinburg) and also N. T. Wright.

The hermeneutical key to this is 1 Cor 8:3-6. This is "an interpretative key to all his [Paul's] other Christological statements." The text reflects "reworking of the Shema in which the one God is split in two," with the result that "*Yhwh* is now somehow identified with Jesus Christ".[30]

The twenty-six Greek words in the Nestle-Aland text of 1 Cor 8:6 (minus the initial ἀλλ') correspond to the numerical value of the Hebrew *Yhwh.* This numerical correspondence suggests a "Greek-and Hebrew-speaking".[31]

---

[30] Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Jesus Monotheism, Volume 1: Christological Origins: The Emerging Consensus and Beyond* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 8, 10.

[31] Ibid., 10. However, there are also opponents of this new emerging Christology. Among them: Adela Yarbro Collins, James McGrath, and James Dunn.

Appendix B

Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs statements on the Triune God.

2 The Trinity

There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. God, who is love, is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation. (Gen. 1:26; Deut. 6:4; Isa. 6:8; Matt. 28:19; John 3:16 2 Cor. 1:21, 22; 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2.)

3 The Father

God the eternal Father is the Creator, Source, Sustainer, and Sovereign of all creation. He is just and holy, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. The qualities and powers exhibited in the Son and the Holy Spirit are also those of the Father. (Gen. 1:1; Deut. 4:35; Ps. 110:1, 4; John 3:16; 14:9; 1 Cor. 15:28; 1 Tim. 1:17; 1 John 4:8; Rev. 4:11.)

4 The Son

God the eternal Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Through Him all things were created, the character of God is revealed, the salvation of humanity is accomplished, and the world is judged. Forever truly God, He became also truly human, Jesus the Christ. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived and experienced temptation as a human being, but perfectly exemplified the righteousness and love of God. By His miracles He manifested God's power and was attested as God's promised Messiah. He suffered and died voluntarily on the cross for our sins and in our place, was raised from the dead, and ascended to heaven to minister in the heavenly sanctuary in our behalf. He will come again in glory for the final deliverance of His people and the restoration of all things. (Isa. 53:4-6; Dan. 9:25-27; Luke 1:35; John 1:1-3, 14; 5:22; 10:30; 14:1-3, 9, 13; Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:3, 4; 2 Cor. 3:18; 5:17-19; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-19; Heb. 2:9- 18; 8:1, 2.)

5 The Holy Spirit

God the eternal Spirit was active with the Father and the Son in Creation, incarnation, and redemption. He is as much a person as are the Father and the Son. He inspired the writers of Scripture. He filled Christ's life with power. He draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms into the image of God. Sent by the Father and the Son to be always with His children, He extends spiritual gifts to the church, empowers it to bear witness to Christ, and in harmony with the Scriptures leads it into all truth. (Gen. 1:1, 2; 2 Sam. 23:2; Ps. 51:11; Isa. 61:1; Luke 1:35; 4:18; John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26; 16:7-13; Acts 1:8; 5:3; 10:38; Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 12:7-11; 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Peter 1:21.)