

Editorial: God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

Any reading of Scripture across the canon leads to one undeniable conclusion: this is a God-centered universe. From the opening verses of Scripture, God alone is presented as the primary actor, the sovereign Creator, the Sustainer, Life-giver, and Redeemer. He is the central figure of the story who alone is independent, self-sufficient, transcendent yet personal, magnificent in all of his perfections, utterly glorious, and worthy of all of our love, devotion, and praise. There is no created thing or person in the entire universe that compares to him; rather he is in a category all by himself. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that this universe is his, not ours, and as such, all glory and honor are due to his holy name. In the end, our chief end as his image bearing creatures is “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

However, what is crucial to note is that at the heart of Scripture’s presentation of our great and glorious God is the doctrine of the Trinity. Contrary to what many may think, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an esoteric, abstract theory that is unrelated to the “practical” affairs of life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, understanding God as triune is central to everything Scripture says about him, and it is what distinguishes him from all other conceptions of “god.” In fact, the entire storyline of Scripture in terms of the plan of salvation would not even make sense without God being triune. Scripture presents our problem before the holy God as one of sin and moral rebellion. It also

presents the solution to our problem as that of a divine solution centered in the divine initiative of the Father, the divine substitutionary work of the Son, and the divine application of the Son’s work to us by the Holy Spirit. In the end, to make sense of the Bible’s presentation of salvation, we need to affirm what Scripture presents: God is triune.

Furthermore, the entire presentation of the God of Scripture only makes sense if we affirm that God is triune. Scripture presents the one true and living God as the one who is sovereign, independent (*a se*), self-sufficient, yet personal. In all non-Christian thought, it is very difficult to bring these attributes together simultaneously. Usually if God’s independent and sovereign nature is affirmed (e.g., Islam and other Unitarian traditions), God’s personal nature, especially the idea that God is love, is downplayed or marginalized. Conversely, if God’s personal nature is stressed in that he loves, communicates, and relates, it is usually at the expense of his self-sufficiency and transcendence (e.g., process theism). Yet, the Bible stresses *both* the sovereign *and* personal nature of God, one who is complete in himself from all-eternity yet also the one who is love, who speaks, and who is truly personal. All of this makes sense, if we affirm what Scripture teaches us about God, namely, that from all-eternity, the one God has existed in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see for example John 1:1-18, 5:16-30; 17:1-5). Truly, the heart of Chris-

tian theology is rooted and grounded in our view of God as triune.

Now it is precisely because the doctrine of the Trinity is so important for Christian theology that we must be vigilant in correctly stating, explaining, and defending the doctrine in every generation. This is one of the main reasons why we have devoted an entire edition of *SBJT* to this subject. All of our articles and Forum pieces reflect some aspect of the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for Christian faith and practice.

The first two articles written by your editor and Keith Johnson respectively, focus on Trinitarian reflection within evangelical and non-evangelical theology alike. In recent days there has been a huge resurgence in discussion regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. This is something that we should applaud. In an age of pragmatism and biblical-theological illiteracy, a good dose of theological reflection, especially when it comes to who God is, is certainly welcome. However, much of this reflection has become quite speculative and far removed from Scriptural teaching. So, for example, within evangelical theology some scholars appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity in order to ground a “wider-hope” or “inclusivist” theology that disassociates the work of the Spirit from the Son and, thus, allows these scholars to affirm that people who have never heard the gospel may be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ. Something similar is also occurring in non-evangelical theology, where appeal is made to the Trinity to warrant religious pluralism. My article investigates the recent discussion within evangelical theology, while Johnson’s article masterfully describes and critiques what is happening in non-evangelical theology.

Bruce Ware continues our discussion in his helpful article that seeks to ask and answer the question: Must God be triune for the Messiah to be our Savior and for his atoning death to be efficacious? He gives us an exercise in “faith seeking understanding” as he unpacks the important relationships between the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, and soteriology. Our final two articles, written by Fred Zaspel and Michael Haykin respectively, give us historical reflections on the famous Princetonian theologian, B. B. Warfield, and a less than famous Baptist pastor, Benjamin Beddome (1717-1795). Both individuals expounded and defended the doctrine of the Trinity during a time in which the doctrine faced some of its stiffest challenges. From both of these figures we learn to appreciate how those in the past sought to explain, expound, and defend God’s triune nature in light of the challenges of their day—something that we must do afresh today. Finally, our *SBJT* Forum discusses how the doctrine of the Trinity should impact our preaching, hermeneutics, evangelism, and every aspect of our Christian lives.

In all of this, we have only begun to scratch the surface of such an incredible and glorious subject. But in so doing, it is my prayer that we will learn to think afresh about our great triune God, who is worthy of all of our thought, reflection, and praise. To him alone be all glory.