



SIMPLY TRINITY

THE UNMANIPULATED
FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT

MATTHEW BARRETT

Foreword by Scott R. Swain

“Matthew Barrett has the evangelical instinct for classic, time-tested, deeply traditional biblical teaching about the Trinity. This book is the story of his joy in finding that doctrine after clearing aside some rubble and debris that had accumulated on top of it in recent years. *Simply Trinity* proclaims the good news of the unmanipulated doctrine of the triune God.”

Fred Sanders, Torrey Honors College, Biola University

“Matthew Barrett’s book is perfect for students of theology in the evangelical tradition. In clear and readable chapters Barrett draws his readers to appreciate classical trinitarian theology as the foundation of biblical faith. Readers are led away from the rocks of those who have sought to convince us that such theology needs radical change, and into the calm, wide sea that is the Christian community’s historic faith.”

Lewis Ayres, Durham University

“Matthew Barrett exposes those tinkering with the Trinity and provides a great antidote to them. He offers a sane and sober recovery of the church’s exegesis of Scripture to explain that the three persons of the Godhead share in one substance, power, and eternity without hierarchies or other heresies. Barrett provides an informative mix of exegesis, church history, and systematic theology to defend the Christian doctrine of the Trinity against its unwitting saboteurs.”

Michael F. Bird, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

“*Simply Trinity* delivers an accessible scholarly introduction to historic and biblical understandings of the Trinity and demonstrates how much is at stake in the trinitarian debates that have recently roiled the evangelical community. I recommend it highly.”

Thomas S. Kidd, Baylor University

“I was blown away by this book, a clear, powerful intervention into trinitarian controversy. The critique of evangelical subordinationists alone is fantastic, and no attentive reader should miss their connections with social trinitarianism. Evangelical theology

is in serious trouble, and I think many of us have known that for years, but this book will be impossible to ignore. We simply must turn this trend around or evangelicalism will lose its hold on the gospel.”

Craig Carter, Tyndale University

“I hope this accessible book is widely read and discussed, especially by evangelicals. It will challenge some things taught in recent decades. But Barrett’s arguments from Scripture and tradition are to be taken seriously, since we all long for our speech and worship of the triune God to be faithful.”

Kelly M. Kopic, Covenant College

“Matthew Barrett has written a stunner of a book. He meets head-on the major turn away from the historic Christian account of the triune God to the post-enlightenment account that favored redefinition and novelty tending toward unorthodoxy. In the twentieth century evangelicals adopted this new strategy and have sought to redefine God in favor of their social agendas. I am grateful to God for this book and for the service Professor Barrett has done the church of Christ.”

Liam Goligher, Tenth Presbyterian Church

“Barrett glorifies the infinitely simple Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with deep wisdom. This would be reason enough to read, but most doctrinally rich books about the Trinity are boring. By contrast, this book sings! From the get-go, Barrett captures one’s attention and doesn’t let go. The result is urgently needed nourishment for both head and heart.”

Matthew Levering, Mundelein Seminary

“Matthew Barrett provides the church with a valuable resource, introducing a pro-Nicene account of the Trinity peppered with stories, illustrations, and examples that will make *Simply Trinity* both engaging and understandable for students and for Christians in the pew. This work is solidly biblical, consciously pro-Nicene, and the ideal replacement for the various social trinitarian

treatments of the Trinity that have been popular in the local church in recent decades.”

Glenn Butner, Sterling College

“Immediately convinced of the need for this book, readers become acquainted with the history of Trinity drift as well as the history of its antidote. Barrett’s style is both inviting and accessible, utilizing first-person narrative and cogent theological explanation to communicate rigor and depth. He presents a biblically and historically thorough case for the simple triune God differentiated only by eternal generation and spiration. I will value this book as a scholarly dialogue partner and pedagogical teaching text, showing that if we fail to submit ourselves to the image of our gracious God consistent in text and tradition, we will have no foundation from which to think and live theologically in such a demanding time as this.”

Amy Peeler, Wheaton College

“Matthew Barrett is a theologian who delights in the Trinity, a man who perceives the Trinity’s importance. Because of his love of the Trinity, Barrett is flustered by the fact that many twentieth-century evangelical theologians have used and distorted the Trinity for their own social and political agendas. They have misinterpreted the Scriptures. They are ignorant of the church fathers and much of the Christian theological tradition. They have set the Trinity adrift. Barrett’s book is a refutation of such trinitarian drift, but more so, it is a clear, creative, robust, and scholarly presentation of the Trinity, a presentation that will bring joy to the minds and love to the hearts of all who read it. In so doing, all will give praise to the Father, honor to the Son, and glory to the Holy Spirit.”

Thomas G. Weinandy, Capuchin College, Washington, DC

“The Trinity is one of the Bible’s more challenging doctrines, and yet Matthew Barrett ably guides readers through the issues to present clear and cogent teaching. He opens the treasures of the past and draws on patristic, medieval, Reformation, and contemporary theologians to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. But he

also usefully shows where some have gone astray and charitably speaks the truth in love. People would do well to read this book and plumb the depths of the Bible's teaching on the nature of our triune God."

J. V. Fesko, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS

"*Simply Trinity* could be a game changer. By writing a book for laypersons on the doctrine of the Trinity and the contributions of the church fathers, Matthew Barrett has gone a long way in helping to banish popular errors that continue to persist about the very nature of God. But this book is so much more. Complex doctrines and historical terms are brought out of the halls of academia and given back to the laity. As I read, there were moments when I shut my eyes and gave thanks to the God whose essence and perfections are beyond words. Please read this book."

Todd Pruitt, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Harrisonburg, VA;
cohost, *Mortification of Spin* podcast

"*Simply Trinity* successfully aims to put the church back on the path of confessional fidelity. Matthew Barrett helps us understand that how we read the Bible and whom we read it with is imperative to beholding the triune Author who reveals himself to us in his Word. You will see how our understanding of God affects our understanding of salvation and what we forfeit if we get it wrong."

Aimee Byrd, author of *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*

"*Simply Trinity* will help nudge readers to a more scriptural and historically orthodox formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity; it will also help in doing the same for various attributes of God. If you are interested in what Scripture teaches about God and Trinity, how the early creeds of Christianity formulated Scripture's teaching into creedal statements, and how many in our day have left the old paths on this issue, this book is for you."

Richard C. Barcellos, Grace Reformed Baptist Church,
Palmdale, CA; IRBS Theological Seminary, Mansfield, TX

SIMPLY TRINITY

THE UNMANIPULATED
FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT

MATTHEW BARRETT



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2021 by Matthew Barrett

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barrett, Matthew, 1982– author.

Title: Simply Trinity : the unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit / Matthew Barrett.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020035463 | ISBN 9781540900074 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540901521 (casebound)

Subjects: LCSH: Trinity.

Classification: LCC BT111.3 .B355 2021 | DDC 231/.044—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020035463>

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Italics added to Scripture quotations reflect the author’s emphasis.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Matthew Barrett, Simply Trinity

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TO ELIZABETH.

Your resilience is like a budding gerbera daisy after the rain.
The sun shines bright and so do you.



“How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
The children of mankind take refuge
in the shadow of your wings. . . .
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light.” (Psalm 36:7, 9)

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Acknowledgments

Lord knows my pilgrimage writing this book has not been undertaken alone. After I finished *None Greater* (Baker, 2019), John Fesko encouraged me to keep writing on the doctrine of God, because the church and academy alike need to retrieve orthodox trinitarianism. Kelly Kapic was also an inspiration, believing this project was timely considering the confusion he has seen firsthand. I especially want to thank Scott Swain. He has been a conversation partner, always full of trinitarian acumen, always checking the guardrails for safety. Thank you, Scott, for writing the foreword and conveying just how critical it is to get the Trinity right. I am also full of gratitude for Fred Sanders. Fred not only read and endorsed the manuscript but offered wisdom on accuracy and tone. His seasoned experience was invaluable. I must pay the same compliment to the other endorsers who provided valuable feedback. Of course, any residual shortcomings are mine.

I am also grateful to Brian Vos and the team at Baker who believe theology is too important not to be accessible. I am thankful to the Baker team, especially Amy Nemecek, for their hard work smoothing out the rough edges. One of these days I will write a book less complicated than the Trinity. And the marketing team will rejoice with one voice.

Acknowledgments

I wrote this book while on sabbatical. Samuel Powell and Point Loma hosted my family during the summer of 2019. I must say, nothing beats writing on the Trinity with the Pacific coastline between your toes. Thank you for your hospitality; my family still raves about our time on your campus.

I am blessed to teach at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and am blessed still more that those in leadership value writing. Thank you, Jason Allen, for not only initiating this sabbatical but encouraging me to write on the Trinity for the church. I pray this book helps the church find its way home. Jason Duesing has also cheered me on. How rewarding it is to teach at a school where colleagues support one another. Last, to my students: your enthusiasm was fuel in my tank. Whether it was in a seminar or over sweet tea at Anselm House, your probing reminded this fatigued writer why he writes in the first place. Special thanks to Ronni Kurtz, Sam Parkison, Joseph Lanier, Jen Foster, and Timothy Gatewood for their many hours on the bibliography and manuscript.

But few proved as inspirational as my own children. I will never forget those nights when we sang (sometimes even rapped!) the Nicene Creed. Thanks to you, orthodoxy now has rhythm. Most of all, I must thank my wife, Elizabeth. Like she does with every book, Elizabeth begins and ends each pilgrimage with me. What wife stays up in bed until midnight to discuss the intricacies of eternal generation? Mine does, and there is none quite like her. For that reason, I dedicate this book to her.

Foreword

SCOTT R. SWAIN

Matthew Barrett wants to take you on a journey in his time-traveling DeLorean. He wants to take you back to a time when pastors, theologians, and Christians read the Bible differently than we often read it today, to a time when the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was birthed, by means of God’s sovereign Word and Spirit, in the church’s theology and piety. Why is such a journey necessary? Why should you consider joining him? Dr. Barrett is no mad scientist, and his time-traveling quest does not stem from sentimentalism for a bygone golden age of the church. To quote Huey Lewis and the News, Dr. Barrett wants to take you “back in time” because he believes that the future of the church’s doctrine, piety, witness, and worship is at stake.

Classical Protestant theologians spoke of two foundations of the church’s doctrine and life. They identified Holy Scripture as the *cognitive foundation*, the supreme source and norm of all that the church is called to believe and to practice, the foundation of “the truth, which accords with godliness” (Titus 1:1). In addition to this cognitive foundation, they identified the triune God as the

ontological foundation of the church's doctrine and life. As all things are "from" and "through" and "to" the triune God in the order of being (Rom. 11:36), so, they judged, all things are from and through and to the triune God in the order of theological understanding and Christian living. The doctrines of creation and providence, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the church and sacraments, salvation and the last things—each of these doctrines rests on the doctrine of the triune God for its meaning and significance, and the life of godliness that builds on these doctrines directs us to the triune God as our supreme good and final end. The confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Father's Spirit-anointed Son, is the foundation of the Christian confession (Matt. 16:16; 28:19; Mark 12:1–12; Eph. 2:20). For this reason, the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of Christian teaching and living. Without the doctrine of the Trinity, there is no Christianity.

Dr. Barrett wants to take you back in time because many Reformed and evangelical churches in North America and the United Kingdom have lost touch with this foundational doctrine in recent days. How did this happen? Unfortunately, our contemporary predicament does not arise from simple amnesia, simple forgetfulness of something we once knew. Our contemporary predicament arises from the fact that churches have been wrongly catechized in basic Christian teaching on the Trinity.

For reasons Dr. Barrett explores in the pages that follow, a number of late-twentieth-century evangelical theologians neglected and/or rejected several common features of classical Christian teaching about the Trinity and, in place of those features, introduced a new and significantly distorted account of the Trinity, what Dr. Barrett calls a *manipulated Trinity*. Though this approach preserved the distinction between the persons of the Trinity, it wrongly divided the singular being and essence of the Trinity, ascribing different attributes to different persons (e.g., authority to the Father, submission to the Son) and thereby dividing God's supreme and singular will. Over the past several decades, this

approach to the Trinity gained significant traction in evangelical circles through popular study Bibles, textbooks, journals, and conferences and through its promotion in some of the largest, most influential schools of pastoral training in North America and the United Kingdom. Sadly, this largely revisionist work of catechesis has been largely successful. Many evangelical Christians today have come to believe that the manipulated Trinity is orthodox Christian teaching.

It is not. And this is why we should welcome Dr. Barrett's invitation to travel back in time. If we have lost touch with the supreme foundation of Christian teaching, if we have received poor training from our contemporaries, then we must find better, more faithful teachers, even if that means looking to the past. By God's grace, such teachers exist, and they can help us better appreciate who, what, and how the triune God has revealed himself to be in Holy Scripture.

That said, our journey to the past is not for the sake of the past but for the sake of a better future. When something as valuable as orthodox Christian teaching on the Trinity has been lost, we must seek to retrieve it so that we, our children, and our churches might reestablish our faith on a more solid foundation, that we might redirect our piety by the light of a more brilliant star, and that we might renew our witness according to the measure of a more reliable standard. We should welcome Dr. Barrett's invitation to travel back in time so that, by the help of God's sovereign Word and Spirit, we too might join the chorus of saints in heaven and earth throughout all ages in offering the thrice-holy Trinity the worship that he alone deserves.

So buckle up and enjoy your trip. Dr. Barrett is a skillful driver and a reliable guide.

Which brings me to one final reason you should accept Dr. Barrett's invitation to (re)discover the unmanipulated Trinity. One of the major missteps recent trinitarian theology took was to suggest that the Trinity is only meaningful insofar as we can demonstrate

its usefulness for various practical, social, and political ends. But this is to get things utterly backward. The Trinity does not exist for our sake or for the sake of our agendas. The triune God is not a means to an end. We exist for him (1 Cor. 8:6). The Trinity is an end in himself (Rom. 11:36). Therefore, studying the Trinity—seeking better to know and understand, to cherish and adore, to worship and serve the triune God—needs no justification beyond itself. The reason for studying the triune God is not to bend the Trinity to our various social programs. The reason for studying the triune God is to bend our minds, wills, actions, and communities to the Trinity, confident that, in doing so, we will discover in him both the reason for our existence and the fullness of joy (Ps. 16:11; John 15:11; 17:13).

Scott R. Swain, President and James Woodrow Hassell
Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed
Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida



1

Trinity Drift

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to
what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

HEBREWS 2:1

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

J. R. R. TOLKIEN,
THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

Dagon and Ebenezer

“Dad, what’s an Ebenezer?”

It was an honest question. Our family had sung that famous hymn “Come Thou Fount” a thousand times, but this time when we sang “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I’ve come,” my daughter Georgia interrupted, confused by this strange word.

“It’s a rock,” I responded.

“A rock?”

“Let me tell you a story. A long time ago, before Jesus, even before King David, there was a prophet named Samuel.”

“The boy in the temple? Didn’t God keep calling his name when he was sleeping?”

“Yes, but in this story, he was much older. Samuel had a tough job. He had to tell God’s people, Israel, to repent, and they wouldn’t. They wanted to worship false gods instead.”

“Idols?”

“That’s right. Except it was so out of control that God let Israel’s enemy, the Philistines, conquer his people in war. But that’s not the worst of it. The Philistines took the most holy thing God’s people had: the ark of the covenant. The ark sat in the house of God, and when God wanted to be with his people, his presence came down on the ark. When the ark was captured and taken away, it was as if Israel had lost God himself. It was the worst thing that could ever have happened.”

“Did they get it back?”

“They did. The Philistines put the ark in the temple of their god, Dagon. In the morning, Dagon had fallen down face-first in front of the ark. Embarrassing, right? The Philistines propped Dagon back up, but the next morning he was on his face again in front of the ark, and this time his head had fallen off. Not just his head, but his hands too, like they’d been cut right off. Are you laughing?”

“Yes,” Georgia said with a smile she was trying to hide.

“It is kind of funny. Anyway, the Philistines got the message. They sent the ark back. Samuel couldn’t believe it: just when it appeared God had left his people for good, he came back to save them from their enemy. That’s so like God, isn’t it? But Samuel knew how unworthy the people were to receive the ark back. So he summoned all of them to put away their false gods and serve the one true God. Believe it or not, Israel listened and obeyed. When the ark arrived, Samuel took a stone, set it in a spot where Israel would see it for generations to come, and he called that stone—”

“Ebenezer!”

“That’s right. He called it Ebenezer because he said, ‘Till now the Lord has helped us.’ From that day forward, for hundreds and hundreds of years, every time a little boy or girl, just like you, asked their mom or dad why there was a giant stone in the middle of town, they heard this story. The stone was just a stone, but it was so much more: it helped the people always remember who this great God is and what he has done; it helped them never to forget their story, their family heritage.”

“What a great story.”

“Isn’t it? One of my favorites. Don’t forget, it’s your story too.”

First Samuel 6 and 7 really is one of my favorite stories. But it took my little girl to help me see why: *God deeply cares about heritage.*

Your heritage matters. It’s your story, and one day it will be the story of your sons and daughters, a story they will in turn tell to their sons and daughters. And on and on it will go. The stories of our lives, the stories we inherit and find ourselves in, leave us a heritage that more or less defines who we are and who we will become.

But have you ever considered what kind of *theological* heritage you have inherited or will leave behind? If you are reading this

book, your heritage, like my own, may be an *evangelical* one. There are many reasons to be proud of our evangelical heritage: its insistence that one must be born again to be a Christian, its commitment to the Bible as our supreme authority, its determination to keep the cross of Jesus central, and its zeal to take the good news of Jesus's sacrificial death to the nations. These marks define our evangelical story.

But our evangelical heritage is cut short if it's not also a *catholic* heritage—catholic with a small *c*, referring to those universal beliefs the church has confessed from its inception. Due to their biblical fidelity, the church has put these beliefs in creed form to be confessed by the church universal (in all times and in all places) and to guard the church against the threat of heresy, which more often than not poses as scriptural teaching. For this reason, they are called *orthodox* beliefs. Question is, do our beliefs as evangelicals align with those biblical, orthodox beliefs the church has cherished and confessed since its beginning, and will our identity moving forward be characterized by those same beliefs?

I didn't tell you, but the four marks I mentioned above make up the evangelical quadrilateral: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism. According to historians, these four marks define and determine whether one is an evangelical.

But notice, no Trinity. Wherever did the Trinity go?

Young, Restless, Reformed . . . but Trinitarian? Trinity Drift

Perhaps the Trinity is assumed with each mark of the evangelical quadrilateral. I hope so. But you must admit the Trinity's absence as a mark in its own right parallels its absence within evangelical culture today. I have been an evangelical for decades now, and I've never met anyone or heard of anyone outside the evangelical fold who has said, "Those evangelicals may be many things, but there's no question they are trinitarians through and through." I've heard them call us by many names, but trinitarians? Never.

Granted, many evangelical churches and pastors know they are supposed to affirm the Trinity, and so they do. But if they're being honest, they have no idea why other than to say, "The Bible says so somewhere, right?"—though they're not sure what verse that might be. Ask them to articulate that same Trinity *according to biblical orthodoxy*, and they will return a blank stare. You may be giving me one right now.

"Hold on, professor," you might object. "Haven't we experienced a resurgence of theology in recent years?" We have. Malnourished and hungry for meat rather than just milk, young folks at the turn of the century dug deep to resurrect theology in the church, and not just any theology but *Reformed* theology. But two decades have passed, and we now have the advantage of looking back to recognize gaping holes we did not see before—blind spots. Here is one too big to ignore: with all our focus on the bigness of God in salvation history, somehow who our triune God is in eternity was left out. How ironic. The story of *salvation* is a story that reveals not only what our triune God has accomplished but who he is in and of himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How telling. Perhaps our Reformed resurgence is not all that *Reformed* after all, or at least not as Reformed as it should be.

But it's not just that the Trinity has received little attention among the young, restless, and Reformed. There is reason to believe that in the middle of our Reformed resurgence—and all the excitement it brought—we've drifted away from the *biblical, orthodox* doctrine of the Trinity. Trinity drift, as I like to call it, was not sudden and explosive but gradual, like a couple on a sailboat enjoying each other's company in the blue sea breeze, congratulating each other on the fine outing they've prepared, only to look up and realize they no longer see the shore. Worse still, they have no idea how to get back.

Don't believe me? Let's revisit our story; let's go back in time to determine what our future holds.

Back to the Future

One of the best moments of my life was the day my dad and I first watched *Back to the Future*. I had just turned twelve, and little did I know I was about to watch a classic.

Marty McFly and Doc—and let’s not forget Einstein the dog—transcend the limits of time thanks to the DeLorean, a chic time machine if there ever was one. But as Doc and Marty learn the hard way, time travel is littered with danger, so much so that Doc wishes he had never invented the flux capacitor in the first place. To alter the past, even in the slightest, is to put the future at risk. When Marty leaves 1985 and travels back to 1955, he makes a terrible mistake, one that puts his own future existence in jeopardy.

We can’t go back in time to change our evangelical future, as much as I’d jump at the opportunity to glide through history in the DeLorean. But we can look back in time and see where the future might go . . . if things don’t change in the present. What will the future look like for evangelicals if our present trajectory continues to mimic our recent past? To answer that question, we need to take a hard, honest look at the last three decades if we are to understand why the future of trinitarian theology might be in jeopardy.

If Doc’s DeLorean took you back to the turn of the century and to any evangelical college campus, what would you see? You’d see me—the much younger me, that is—sitting in the college cafeteria highlighting the pages of a thick blue hardcover book with a square picture of Moses facing the desert. If it weren’t for Moses, you’d think this tome was a medical encyclopedia. But we all know the book: it’s Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, popular among evangelicals for its clear and trusted summary of Bible doctrine.

But let’s say your DeLorean is sophisticated enough to jump forward in time and drop you off not just on any ol’ college campus, but one with a seminary community. If that’s the case, then

as you leave the DeLorean for the coffee cart and library carrels, you'd spot me again, lost in a book just as thick, but this time with a cover that looked like blue and red stained glass and featured a cross down the middle. It's Millard Erickson's *Systematic Theology*, popular for the philosophical flavor it brings to doctrine, reasoning its way to conclusions with rigorous, logical prose.

These were some of my first introductions to the doctrine of the Trinity. Sure, I believed in the Trinity; I was a Christian, after all. But I had no idea why. So, as a young, aspiring student, eager to learn Christian theology, I jumped in headfirst, yellow and pink highlighters and all. I was sure to pay attention in class, too, looking for opportunities to learn more about this Trinity so central to my Christian identity.

The way I was taught to approach the Trinity, however, was more or less like a hard science. The Trinity was treated like a conundrum, even a problem, but one that could be solved with the proper formula. Since no verse in the Bible taught the Trinity, one had to get mathematical. First, add up and list the verses that say God is one. Next, add up and list the verses that say Father, Son, and Spirit are each fully God. And . . . *voila!* We know God is one essence and three persons. Done.

Or so I thought.

At the time, I remember thinking this approach felt somewhat forced, even foreign to how I first met the Trinity of the Bible. I came to know the Trinity at a young age, but I should clarify that it was the other way around: the Trinity came to know me. The extraordinary thing about my conversion was that it was so . . . ordinary. My parents were faithful to read me the Bible, and they had a special affection for the Gospel of John. After reading texts like John 3, the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to Jesus as the Son of God, and when I trusted in him as my Savior, I knew I had been forgiven by the Father. I do not remember ever hearing a sermon on the Trinity, nor did my parents sit down with me and explain the Trinity. But as I encountered the gospel, I met the Trinity. As I

said, however, it was the other way around: the Trinity met me . . . the Trinity even saved me. I loved the Trinity because the Trinity first loved me.

But when I read about the Trinity in these textbooks, the Trinity not only felt forced—the sum total of a long list of random proof texts—but the result of a magic trick. It was as if the Trinity came out of nowhere. *Poof*. Like a rabbit out of a black hat.

I also noticed something peculiar, even a bit unsettling. Both in college and in seminary, each textbook I read made a point to reject an old Christian belief I had never heard of before: the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. And it wasn't just well-loved textbooks, but some of the most highly recommended books on the doctrine of God by evangelical theologians and philosophers—John Feinberg, Bruce Ware, Robert Reymond, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, and others. These thinkers, and others like them, were helpful in different ways, and their books were assigned by professors I had good reasons to trust. But they shared this weakness: they rejected this ancient doctrine called eternal generation because they were unable to find a text to support it. Without a chapter and verse, it couldn't be included in their list; it just didn't fit into their formula. Others rejected this churchy belief because it just didn't make rational sense, and if it wasn't reasonable, it couldn't be sensible.¹

If you don't know what eternal generation is, don't worry. It sounds more complicated than it really is. In fact, it's something almost too simple to say. Ask yourself this question: *Why does the Bible use the names Father, Son, and Spirit to describe the Trinity?* Answer: in the Bible, especially in a book like the Gospel of John, the Father is called *Father* because he is, well, the Father of his Son. As Fathers do, he begets his Son. That is, after all, what it means to be a Father. But since this is God we're talking about, not a mere mortal, he does so from all eternity. He eternally begets his Son, though he himself is begotten by no one (he is unbegotten). That's because he is the source or origin. This is called *paternity*.

The Son is called Son in Scripture because he has a Father. Think of it this way: he is from his Father, begotten by his Father from all eternity. Or we might say the Son is generated (the words begotten and generated are synonyms) from the Father’s divine nature from all eternity. That is, after all, what it means to be a Son. This is called *filiation*.

The Spirit is called Spirit in Scripture because he proceeds from the Father and the Son from eternity. He is not another Son (a brother) nor a grandson—that would be weird—so we should not say he is eternally begotten or generated. Rather, he is spirated from the Father and the Son. This is called *spiration*, a label that captures the biblical meaning of the word “Spirit.”

Since we’re talking about key words, I should also mention that there is a phrase that sums up all three of these biblical names: *eternal relations of origin*. That is a phrase to remember. Highlight it. Underline it. Circle it. It sounds sophisticated, but its meaning is quite simple really. The word “origin” is fitting because we are describing where these three persons come from (e.g., the Son is *from* the Father). The word “eternal” is appropriate since this is God we have in view. And the word “relation” is another way of referring to the *persons* of the Trinity, specifically what is so unique about each of them (e.g., the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten, the Spirit is spirated).

Now, back to the DeLorean. As I did some digging of my own, I discovered that this ancient way of describing the Trinity was—well, how do I put it—*the norm*. For two thousand years the church’s best Bible interpreters believed this was the biblical way to define the Trinity. This made my jaw drop. The textbooks and teachers introducing me to the Trinity acted as if their scientific, mathematical approach, an approach that happily showed eternal generation the door, was just . . . standard. Everyone around me assumed it was too. But it wasn’t. Not even close. It’s only been in the last century, in *our* generation, that the Trinity has been reformulated in radical ways.

But my deep digging uncovered more: not only had Christianity's best Bible interpreters confessed a doctrine like eternal generation ever since the church's conception, but they believed such a doctrine safeguarded the deity of Christ from the most dangerous of heresies. To be clear, we are talking about a belief so essential to the Trinity, distinguishing the Son *as Son* from the Father *as Father*, that when the deity of Christ was questioned in the fourth century, the church fathers gathered at the Council of Nicaea (325)—perhaps the most important council in all of Christian history—and wrote a creed to affirm eternal generation as a condition of true orthodoxy (see chapter 2). If the Son is not begotten from the Father's divine essence from all eternity, they argued, then the Son is not equal to the Father in deity. The doctrine not only distinguished the person of the Son from the person of the Father but ensured the two were coeternal and coequal in divinity, power, will, glory, and authority. *To affirm eternal generation was equivalent to confessing oneself to be a Christian, and a Bible-believing Christian at that. To deny eternal generation was to align yourself with heresy.*

Again, my jaw hit the floor. How can such a belief be dismissed today by evangelicals, the same people who claim to be crucicentric? It was unnerving, to say the least, that such a trinitarian basic had been cut out of evangelical textbooks and erased from the whiteboards of evangelical classrooms—classrooms where I was supposed to be learning about the Trinity. And then it occurred to me: we have and still are experiencing Trinity drift.

But wait, things get worse. The drift continues . . .

The Beach-Is Books Are Calling . . . and I Must Go

Since I am a Los Angeles native by birth, you won't be surprised to hear me say that wherever I go, my spirit tends to wander back to the City of Angels. It may seem strange to those who crave the open plains of the Midwest—which I also love, by the way—but

I feel at home whenever I fly back to that concrete city with its spaghetti freeways.

Southern California is a paradox: its sunburned concrete stretches for miles on end, but you can always count on any stretch of concrete leading to a beach with golden sand and white-capped waves. Each summer our family escapes the oppressive humidity of the Midwest for sunny SoCal, known for its immutable weather of seventy-five degrees. It's always worth it: each day I read and write, but in the afternoons and evenings we trek on down to the beachfront to cool off in the Pacific and watch the sunset show off its orange, pink, and yellow canvas as if it were one of LA's fashion models walking down the runway. One summer, this habit became so customary to us beach bums that my daughter swore she'd buy the T-shirt she kept seeing that read, *The beach is calling, and I must go*. Unfortunately for mom and dad, kids have a way of turning the tables. When the trash needed an exit, or when little sister needed a bowl of cereal, my oldest would say with that cunning smile of hers, "Sorry, Mom. Sorry, Dad. Books are calling, and I must go."

That summer it was mostly the beach that kept calling, and we were all too willing to be summoned. But every once in a while, the summons flipped, and I'd skip writing and find a local bookstore to peruse. This is my habit no matter what town our family inhabits—I'm incurable. At the end of every vacation, the kids pack up seashells while Dad tries, hopelessly, to shove a stack of books in an already full suitcase.

One afternoon I discovered a hole-in-the-wall shop filled with books from floor to ceiling. Here's what I did: I started in fiction, picking out those classics I have yet to read, knowing that in the far corner was a neglected section called "theology" that awaited me like the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae. But to my surprise, this particular bookstore had a warehouse full of cherries. There on the wall before me was a story, each shelf of books telling me what ideas had been engaged over the last fifty to seventy years.

Like a child in a candy store, I started grabbing books by the handfuls. But after four hours it was time to go. I purchased my big stack of books from the lady at the cash register and walked outside to be greeted by the salty smell of fish and chips.

When my family returned from vacation, with tan lines and enough vitamin D to survive the winter, I hid myself away in my study and cleared an entire bookcase to view all the books I had purchased, as well as a slew of others I had collected over the years. I won't trouble you with the author and title of each book I opened—we'll meet some of them in chapter 3 anyway. But I must share with you what I discovered. Book after book revealed a pattern, and each shelf told a story.

First, I took up a book by one of the most influential theologians of the late twentieth century. His agenda was explicit: the Trinity is our master plan for *politics*. Just as the Trinity is a community or society of equal persons cooperating with one another, so too power structures in human society should favor a community of cooperation and equality. God is not a unitary monarch (monotheism) nor is the Trinity a hierarchy (with the Father as the authority), both of which result in a dictatorship in society. Rather, there is an equality among the persons, and that equality in community is our model for a socialist society. *Who knew the Trinity could be so political?*

Next, I got grabby, taking a handful all at once, since each had the word “ecumenical” sprinkled across their pages. These authors also appealed to the cooperative unity between the persons of the Trinity, but this time as a master plan for ecumenism, unity between different religions. Like the Trinity, the distinctions of each religious party need not be lost; nevertheless, cooperation and interdependence are primary, as each party (person) embraces unity with others, in this case for the sake of missions. Some even believed that the plurality that exists in this unified society we call Trinity is our blueprint for embracing religious pluralism in the world. *Who knew the Trinity could be so inclusive?*

I put this stack of books down, both for its sheer weight and because I spotted a few outliers hiding in the upper right-hand corner of the bookshelf. At first, I thought these books and papers were misplaced because they had a lot to say about environmentalism. But I was mistaken. These authors had transfigured the Trinity for the sake of ecology. They warned against ecological heresies that treat humans as superior to the environment and subordinate nature to man's power. Creation and humankind share the same essence, imaging the Son's equality with the Father in the Trinity. *Who knew the Trinity could be so green?*

Next came a slew of brightly colored books in shades of blue and green, but still a few in plain white or black. Again, I was convinced these books must be misplaced, for in each of them gender and sexual identity occupied the author's attention. But again, I was mistaken. Looking at one book after another, I quickly learned that there is no agenda as sexy as gender identity in theology. These authors were convinced that the equality between the persons of the Trinity is our justification for equality between the sexes in church as well as society. Just as there is a society of equal persons in the Trinity, so too are the sexes, male and female, equal in human society. An egalitarian Trinity should result in an egalitarian society. Some books on this shelf were so bold as to call God a woman. *Who knew the Trinity could be so feminist?*

Other books on this same shelf were written by evangelicals, but instead of using the Trinity to argue for gender equality, these authors used the Trinity to introduce hierarchy. They appealed to a functional subordination of the Son to the Father in eternity as justification for the subordination of wives to their husbands and women to their pastors. Just as the Father and Son are equal in essence but distinct in their roles, so too the wife is equal as a person but subordinate in role to the authority of her husband. Like many before them, these authors redefined orthodox trinitarianism, substituting orthodox categories (like simplicity and

eternal generation) for social categories (roles as *relationships*). *Who knew the Trinity could be so patriarchal?*

Just when I thought I'd seen it all, I picked up a book that had the word "sexuality" right there in the title. While the books I'd just put down used subordination to support hierarchy, this book used a similar method but appealed instead to the mutual love between the Father and Son to support homosexuality. These authors defended gay and lesbian marriages on the basis of functional roles within the Godhead. Just as the differences between the persons of the Trinity do not preclude their equality, so too the differences between heterosexual and homosexual do not preclude the equality between different sexual orientations. They remain equal and at the same time distinct, retaining their personal identity (like the Trinity). *Who knew the Trinity could be so sexual?*

Socialism, ecumenism, pluralism, environmentalism, egalitarianism, complementarianism, homosexuality . . . as I put the books down, my theological soul felt a little nauseous.² These were the books cherished by the past two generations of churchgoers, pastors, students, and professors. These were the books the church and academy turned to in order to understand the Trinity. And most of all, these were the books that taught the next generation how to use the Trinity to meet whatever social agenda they believed mattered most. There has been no end to the ways we use (abuse) the Trinity to meet our social agendas. And then it hit me: not only are we experiencing *Trinity drift*, but our redefinition of the Trinity has given us a license to *manipulate the Trinity*.

For evangelicals and liberals alike, the Trinity has become a wax nose, twisted and molded at will until the biblical, orthodox Trinity is beyond recognition. With the best of intentions, modern thinkers have transformed theology into anthropology. The Trinity has become a mirror in which we see our own reflection; we hold

up our doctrine of the Trinity, and we might as well be holding up a picture of ourselves. We are no longer made in the image of the Trinity, but the Trinity is reinterpreted and refashioned until it is now made in our own image. The result: there are as many Trinities as there are social agendas. The Trinity itself has even been redefined as social to ensure these social agendas have traction. Our endless quests to make the Trinity relevant to society result in one thing: the triune God in eternity has been swallowed up by who we want him to be for us in history.

The Trinity is our social program.

All the Air We Breathe but Cannot See

For all my talk about SoCal, I should confess that I actually grew up in San Francisco. For those unfamiliar, San Fran is at the top of California while Los Angeles is at the bottom. It makes for one of the most scenic road trips. From start to finish—if you don't sightsee, which is not likely—the trip takes six hours to drive from Lombard Street to Hollywood. But if you fall asleep on your way in, you may miss a disturbing paradox, one that any honest California native knows to be true but more often than not shocks tourists.

In SoCal, when you sit in traffic moving as slow as molasses on Interstate 5 (which Californians just call *The 5*), take a seat in Dodger Stadium with a ten-inch Dodger Dog, or ride the Matterhorn at Disneyland with your screaming kids, you do not see all the smog you're inhaling. But for those who first visit the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz Island, and Fisherman's Wharf in San Fran and then drive all the way down to SoCal, a different picture emerges. By the time you tap your brakes flying down the Grapevine and look up to see the City of Angels for the first time, you might just gasp at all the smog you now see—it's anything but angelic.

It's possible for everyone in society to go about their busy lives and never question all the air they cannot see. That is, until they are given a new perspective. Vantage point can make all the difference.