



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture
(*Scripture*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Inspired Translator
(*Scripture*, pp. 66-69)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Institute for Faith and Learning
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97270
Waco, TX 76798-7270
Phone 1-254-710-4805
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2014 Institute for Faith and Learning

A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture

The goal of any Christian engagement with Scripture is a deep and profound acquaintance with the Triune God. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information about God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing.

Prayer

God of love, we come to you.

You, O Lord, are the God of story and song, of wisdom and law.

You have spoken to us through the ages, binding us together in one common narrative. You have given us the Scripture, a treasure we can hold in our hands.

Draw near to us now, breathing life into our hearts. Write yourself into our hearts, that we may be written into the story of your love. Amen.

Responsive Scripture Reading: from 1 Peter 1:2-3, 10, and 12

Sisters and brothers, we have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be ours made careful inquiry.

It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but us, in regard to the things that have now been announced to us through those who brought us good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look!

Reflection

The doctrine of the Triune God, whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20), emerges slowly in the biblical narrative. God is not addressed as Triune in the Old Testament; but this, as Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue note, is in keeping with its prophecies “that fuller, final revelation of YHWH will accompany Israel’s renewal, Gentiles’ redemption, and accordingly God’s restored rule over creation.” Nor is the doctrine of the Trinity spelled out in the New Testament. They clarify, “By divine design the Holy Spirit takes time to help the Church develop the mind of Christ regarding the full implications of his work.” Yet many passages, like 1 Peter 2-12, clarify God’s work of salvation in a distinct threefold structure.

Treier and Pardue invite us to circle around our reflection in this way: Suppose (with the Church) that it is the Triune God that we meet in the Bible. How does this fact reshape our understanding of the nature of Scripture and how to read it?

First, it becomes clear that “the Bible is an instrument of God’s self-communication to foster communion.” We glimpse the nature of this communion in God’s design for Eden, where “the Word, the very Image of the Father, dwelt in human hearts, and the Spirit conferred upon them fellowship unique among the creatures.” After the image of God is occluded by human sin, it is partially clarified by the Law and the Prophets; but only in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, is Senior Scholar in The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2014 Institute for Faith and Learning

“the Word of God inhabiting humanity in the full power of the Spirit... is the renewal of the Father’s likeness in human hearts” finally accomplished. Thus, Scripture’s mysterious story is given to us in order to reveal and foster a “fellowship with God so deep that no eye, heart, and mind has yet grasped its fullness.”

How, then, do we read it well? “Meeting the Triune God in Scripture is not a solo enterprise: it happens in community with contemporaries and saints gone before,” they note. “In these relationships, we learn practices that build interpretive virtues and block bad interpretive habits.” They commend three practices.

- ▶ *By reading with the rule of faith*, we let “the potentially fragmentary elements of Scripture speak in a unified (though not uniform) fashion. They proclaim, celebrate, hope for, and promise the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Spirit.”
- ▶ *Critically attending to early Christian interpretation of the Bible* can reorient us to the goal of meeting God in its pages. In contrast to some modern approaches that read the Bible without reference to doctrine, the earlier “Christian writers usually considered the Triune God to be...the main character in the story of redemption, and the divine author in whose friendship lies infinite wisdom and grace.”
- ▶ *Recognizing the Spirit’s work in guiding our interpretation*, we should include confession and openness to God with our meditation on Scripture. Treier and Pardue worry that in recent centuries “the Spirit’s work has primarily been relegated to cognitive illumination—connecting dots in readers’ minds, facilitating understanding and application.... Since reading Scripture faithfully is a whole-person affair, the Spirit’s renovation of affections, habits, and dispositions is essential.”

The Spirit also guides cultural and social forms of interpretation. As Christianity develops globally, we “have the privilege of grasping with new depth the nature of the Triune God revealed in Scripture because of cross-cultural exchanges. In these situations, we hear the Word anew when we see the Spirit’s life-giving work take cultural shape, helping us to know the love of the Triune God more fully.”

Study Questions

1. What indications of the triune nature of God do you notice in 1 Peter 1:2-12?
2. How, according to Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue, can the doctrine of the Trinity reshape our understanding of the nature of Scripture and how we should read it?
3. Consider how each of the three practices sketched here expands the community that guides our interpretation of Scripture. What bad interpretative habits does each one inhibit?
4. The Holy Spirit inspired the scholar Jerome to translate Scripture into the Latin language and Roman culture. How is this inspiration depicted in the paintings by Antonello and Castagno that Heidi Hornik discusses?

Departing Hymn: “Many Books, One Holy Canon”

A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the biblical narrative points toward the Triune nature of God.
2. To discuss how the doctrine of the Trinity reshapes our understanding of the nature of Scripture and how to read it.
3. To introduce three practices which support a Trinitarian way of reading the Bible.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

One of our authors, Daniel Treier, recalls attending a life-changing worship service at St. Paul's on Bloor Street in Toronto. "I was caught short by the bulletin headline: Trinity Sunday," he reports, because he did not know there was such a day in the church year. "I was even more surprised by the preacher: she centered her sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity! That was courage I definitely had never encountered before. But soon the sermon had me awestruck at the beauty of our God: a God who is love, inviting us into fellowship in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit."

At the time, Treier was a Ph.D. student in theology. He explains, "Had I already learned, enough to regurgitate adequately in writing, Trinitarian theology? Yes. Had I learned to appreciate its beauty and love its Subject? Not really. Instead, sadly, I had learned to avoid the doctrine, secretly suspecting it could not be defended with sound biblical exegesis or philosophical reasoning, and that for ministry-keeping purposes it would best be affirmed without receiving much (risky) attention."

"By God's grace, though, Trinity Sunday in Toronto did not just return me to academic theological study with renewed vigor; it changed my life, furthering a spiritual turn toward divine love, nourishment in liturgical practice, and life and healing in fellowship." (*Scripture*, 11-12)

Before that Sunday, it seemed impossible to conceive of biblical interpretation in robustly Trinitarian terms. For it seemed difficult to be confident of Trinitarian theology as really biblical.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Invite members to read responsively the reading based on 1 Peter 1:2-3, 10, and 12 in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue begin by showing how Scripture points toward the Triune nature of God, but their main goal is to understand how the doctrine of the Trinity reshapes how we should read Scripture.

Does this look suspiciously circular? It becomes clear that this circling back is necessary and appropriate to connect the theological dots. A Christian way of reading the Bible should be governed by the nature of the Triune God revealed in its pages. Treier and Pardue briefly commend three practices for reading Scripture; in future study guides we will learn more about these practices and see examples of them at work.

Study Questions

1. In 1 Peter 1:2, the three persons of God are used to describe the Christian identity of the recipients of the letter: they are “chosen” by God the Father and “sanctified” by the Holy Spirit so that they can be “obedient” to Jesus Christ. A second section (vv. 3-9) highlights the relationship of the Father to Jesus Christ: by resurrecting Jesus, the Father gives believers hope to face trials and endure suffering. The Spirit is the focus of a third section (vv. 10-12): the Spirit of Christ inspired the prophets of Israel and the Holy Spirit directs the evangelists who share the good news of God’s redemption – “things into which angels long to look!”
2. Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue summarize: “By looking at the Trinitarian relations, we encounter a dynamic of Word and Spirit, with God’s definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ creating freedom for response by the Holy Spirit. Hence the meaning of biblical texts unfolds in a history of covenant fellowship.” We begin to see the stories, poems, and teachings of the Bible as playing their roles within God’s invitation through the Spirit to know, receive, and obediently embrace the Image of God that is perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. God is up to something through the words of Scripture: drawing us to himself through his Word, Jesus Christ. Thus, we should read Scripture not merely for truths about God, or the history of religions, or the moral life, but to glimpse the beauty of the Triune God and to respond to the call for communion with God and (through him) with one another. Treier and Pardue conclude, “We read for not just cognitive content but communion – the fullness of personal communication. We see truth and love not as opposites that have difficulty attracting, but instead as two dimensions of the one new humanity created in Jesus Christ.”
3. Form three groups to examine the practices individually and report their insights. The first practice, interpreting Scripture by the rule of faith (*analogia fidei*), maintains our focus on the big picture of the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It inhibits interpreting passages in isolation from the whole, or in light of another theological construction. This joins us with the community of faithful Christian interpreters through the centuries. The next study, “A Journey of Reading Scripture,” will have more to say about this.

The second practice, critically attending to early Christian interpretation of the Bible, can provide encouragement and some models for seeking an experience of the Triune God through Scripture. Even when their approaches are mistaken, these early Christians’ efforts help us break the modern habit of bracketing all theological doctrines when we read Scripture. The fourth study, “Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian,” gives an example of the critical appropriation of a ninth-century commentator, Christian of Stavelot.

The third practice, attending to the fullness of the Spirit’s work, reminds us that interpretation of the Bible is guided by the Triune God. “The Father speaks in the Son, and the Spirit completes this communicative act as Lord of our hearing,” Treier and Pardue write. Openness to the Spirit requires habits of obedience, confession, and meditation on Scripture, in addition to scholarly study. Since interpretation is not an individual, but a communal project, they urge us to “recognize the Spirit’s freedom to minister through cultural and social forms. Just as the Spirit gives life to linguistic symbols (jots and tittles) as modes of God’s self-revelation, so the Spirit sanctifies cultural resources to reveal new depths of meaning in the written Word.” This includes openness to global Christian insights from other cultures.

4. Antonello’s *Saint Jerome in His Study* depicts the scholar surrounded by open books (of biblical manuscripts, theology, philological reference?): the Spirit’s inspiration is mediated by the authors and books Jerome studies. Castagno’s *Saint Jerome’s Vision of the Trinity with Saints Paula and Eustochium* depicts an inspiring vision of the Trinity, shared with two close friends. Once again Jerome’s submission to God (expressed here through bodily mortification rather than diligent study) is celebrated.

Departing Hymn

“Many Books, One Holy Canon” is on pp. 55-57 of *Scripture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.