

BOOK REVIEW

of

Thomas K. Johnson,

What Difference Does the Trinity Make?: A Complete Faith, Life, and Worldview,
Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2009.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Paul Copan, in a chapter titled “Is the Trinity a Logical Blunder? God as Three and One”, in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors*, edited by Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, B&H Academic, 2009, writes (p. 205) that “in our age of vanishing biblical literacy, the average Christian’s understanding of the Trinity is minimal or even heterodox. . . . many fail to recognize Christianity’s unique doctrine of God”. He continues (p. 206): “Christians should not think of God apart from His self-revelation as triune.” At the beginning of his book titled *The Trinity*, The Trinity Foundation, 1984, Gordon Clark writes that (p. viii) over the period of thirty years prior to his writing of his book that he had heard only one sermon on the Trinity. James R. White, in his book *The Forgotten Trinity*, Bethany House Publishers, 1998, writes (p. 14) on the doctrine of the Trinity that “We hang a person’s very salvation upon the acceptance of the doctrine, yet if we are honest with ourselves, *we really aren’t sure exactly why.*” Robert Letham, in his book *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, P&R Publishing, 2004, he quotes Bernard Lonergan (p. 1) as saying “the trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding.” Letham bemoans that (p. 1) “For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove, remote from daily life.” To the best of my recollection, I have never heard a sermon on the Trinity, nor have I attending a Sunday School class on the topic. Yet, as indicated by Thomas K. Johnson in his book on the Trinity under review here, it forms the core of both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Clearly, this doctrine is unique to Christianity, and is, in fact, the defining doctrine of Christianity, and reveals most fully who God is, whom to know is life eternal. It is a strange phenomenon that this doctrine has seemingly fallen into a lack of use in the Christian community, perhaps because it is thought too difficult, and perhaps it is a consequence of “our age of vanishing biblical literacy,” as noted above. Yet, hopeful signs appear, as a number of commendable recent books on the topic have been published. Most of these tend to be academically oriented and are recommended to serious students. However, the book under review by Johnson is unique in that it is devotional in its approach, designed for Bible study group discussion, and stressing how we come to a better knowledge and experience of God by fully apprehending Him in His Triune revelation of Himself.

Thomas K. Johnson has a Master of Divinity degree from Covenant Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in ethics and philosophical theology from the University of Iowa. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America. He has taught at a number of universities and since 2003 he is Professor of Apologetics and Ethics at Martin Bucer Seminary (MBS) which has several study centers in major German cities, as well as in Austria and Switzerland, and in both Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey. In 2004 he helped establish the MBS study center in Zlin, Czech Republic. Since 2007 he has served as MBS Vice President for Research and Personnel Development. He also currently serves as interim dean of the Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary and is also directing the Comenius Institute in Prague. He has lectured in eleven countries and has about 80 published articles, essays, and reviews in several languages. Dr. Johnson is a Professor of the International Institute for Christian Studies located in Overland Park, Kansas. Dr. Johnson describes his theological position as “Post-critical transcendental orthodoxy.” By post-critical he means that he does not recommend evaluating Christian truth claims and structuring our appropriation of the faith in light of the various types of critical philosophy and ideology of the modern and (supposedly) post-modern era, but that the core structural doctrines of the faith (of which the Trinity is the key ontological structural doctrine) form the framework for appropriating the faith, understanding ourselves and our world, and evaluating the various philosophies and ideologies. Some of fundamentalist and evangelical theology is, in Dr. Johnson’s opinion, anti-critical, but in a manner that accepts a heavy amount of modern and postmodern thought. Johnson recommends that we move beyond anti-critical to post-critical. By using the word “transcendental” Johnson picks up much of what Cornelius Van Til promoted, which is dependent on a well developed doctrine of general revelation.

This short book of some 77 pages is volume 7 in the Global Issues series of the World Evangelical Alliance which has recognized the doctrine of the Trinity as an issue of global importance. The book has five chapters. Each chapter ends with study questions, except for the last one. The chapter titles are as follows: *Responding to the Three Persons of the Trinity*, *Life in Light of the First Article of the Creed*, *Life in Light of the Second Article of the Creed*, *Life in Light of the Third Article of the Creed*, and *Responding to the Trinity*. Most of the volume follows the first three articles of the Creed (either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed).

Responding to the Three Persons of the Trinity has the following subdivisions: The Apostles' Creed; The Trinity and the Bible; Early Distortions of the Christian Faith (Marcionism, Gnosticism, Arianism); The Nicene Creed; and Study Questions. In this chapter Johnson stresses that the doctrine of the Trinity is a core belief, perhaps *the* core belief of the Christian Faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is stressed in the Apostles' Creed and in the Nicene Creed, is taught in the Bible, had to be developed by the early Church, and was and is the clearest discriminator of Christian orthodoxy. On page 22, Johnson writes that "The doctrine of the Trinity thus forms the core of Christian belief, the earliest outline of an entire biblical worldview, and an overview of the balanced, complete, and attractive Christian life." On page 20, he writes "What this means is that the doctrine of the Trinity, and the closely related doctrine of the incarnation (and two natures) of Christ, is the foundation for believing in the grace of God in Christ. If there is no Trinity and no incarnation, we are without hope, since the only alternative is the hopeless path of trying to earn God's favor and salvation. At its core, the doctrine of the Trinity makes God's undeserved grace in Christ the very center of our faith and life. This is what gives balance, completeness, and even beauty to a life lived in conscious response to all three Persons of the divine Trinity."

Life in Light of the First Article of the Creed has the following subdivisions: God the Father and the Goodness of Creation; God the Father and the Creation of Mankind; God the Father and the Cultural Mandate; God the Father and Practical Wisdom; God the Father and Creational Revelation; God the Father and the Moral Law; God the Father and the Universal Questions; God the Father and Common Grace; The Twofold Work of God in the World; Dualities, Religion, and Culture; Dualities and Dualisms; and Study Questions on the First Article of the Creed. In this chapter, God the Father, the first Person of the Trinity, is presented as the Creator, the giver of general revelation, the author of the moral law. On page 23, Johnson writes "When we say we believe in creation, we are saying we believe that God is the only source of all that exists, including matter, energy, time, space, causality, beauty, and ourselves; truly God is far greater than we can ever comprehend or imagine, and all our thoughts fail to give him the honor to which he is due." Most frequently, it is assumed that we humans are the ones with questions about life, about meaning and purpose, and that we turn to religion and philosophy in our efforts to find answers. While this may be true, Johnson turns this on its ear and presents God as the source of these questions in the form of general revelation. On page 31 he writes: "Our Creator continues to be a question-asking God, and these questions go out to all people by means of God's general revelation. There are certain questions which seem to come to mind to people almost all over the world and in almost every time. We might call them universal questions. These questions include: What is a human being? What is wrong with the world? What is the meaning of life? Where did everything come from? What has always existed? What is death? Why do we feel guilt? How can we find forgiveness? Is there any real hope? . . . When we say we believe in 'God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,' we are claiming that our Father still is the question-asking God who raises questions for all people, questions that prepare the way for his answer, which is Christ, the Savior. When we and our neighbors think about ultimate questions, we should realize that these questions are raised by our Creator, so that he can give us the answers we need."

Life in Light of the Second Article of the Creed has the following subdivisions: Truth and the Second Article of the Faith; Christ and Forgiveness; Christ and Justification by Faith; Christ and Our Adoption as the Children of God; Christ and *Agape* Love; The Imitation of Christ; Christ and Priorities; Christ and the Great Commission; Christ the Judge; and Study Questions on the Second Article of the Creed. Individually, and in terms of society, we need a savior. Knowledge of God the Father leaves us incomplete as far as our needs go. Johnson writes on pages 40 and 41: "Plato looked for a philosopher/king who could lead society into a just republic. Marx thought that the proletariat would be the savior and bring in the socialist revolution. In a less defined manner, many people think progress, technology, or good government will solve the world's deepest problems. But Christians confess that Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the Savior who will ultimately bring salvation. When people begin to more fully understand the Second Person of the Trinity, they also begin to see much about God's undeserved special grace and God's intervention in history; he came to save us in the midst of our great needs. . . . In the Apostles' Creed we say Jesus 'was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.' After much thought, discussion and study of Scripture, the early church concluded that Jesus is 'at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin.' The early church then emphasized that the purpose of the incarnation, the reason the eternal Son of God took on a fully human nature is 'for

us and for our salvation.” It is through the work of the Second Person of the Trinity that a Christian’s life is transformed. Johnson writes on page 50: “The person who believes in the Second Person of the Trinity should have very different priorities than the person who does not share this belief. This is because the believer is united with Christ in a deep sense. As Paul stated it, ‘Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.’ (Colossians 3:1-3) Our union with Christ should lead us to have very distinctive things on our minds, specifically those things which are above.” Near the end of this chapter, on page 52, Johnson summarizes the impact that belief in God the Father, and belief in God the Son, should have upon us: “Faith that understands the first article of the creed leads to understanding our world as it comes from God, which requires gratitude and service in our entire lives. Faith that responds to the second article of the creed, experiencing forgiveness and being overwhelmed by justification, leads to love, sacrifice, service, and proclamation of the grace we have received.”

Life in Light of the Third Article of the Creed has the following subdivisions: The Holy Spirit and Leadership; The Common Working of the Holy Spirit; The Holy Spirit and Creativity; The Holy Spirit and the New Life; The Fruit of the Holy Spirit; The Gifts of the Holy Spirit; The Power of the Holy Spirit; The Holy Spirit and the Word of God; Believing in the Holy Spirit; and Study Questions on the Third Article of the Creed. It can probably well be said that Evangelical Christians are deficient in their understanding and practical application of the doctrine of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, even more so than of the first two persons of the Trinity. While being filled with the Holy Spirit is a very important teaching of the Scriptures, as Johnson writes on page 55, “It is important to remember that ‘no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.’ (1 Corinthians 12:3) Wherever people believe in Jesus and call him Lord, the Holy Spirit is active in their lives. Faith is impossible without the work of the Spirit. Everyone who believes in Jesus has the Spirit dwelling ‘in’ him or herself. Any type of faith that is seriously Christian (in contrast with other types of faith) is only possible because of the Holy Spirit’s work.” A refreshing emphasis of Johnson’s treatment of the Holy Spirit is that He is the source of all that is good, even outside of the community of faith. Johnson writes on page 59: “Artistic beauty in music, sculpture, painting, fashion and architecture is somehow inspired by the same Spirit who brooded over the face of the earth and gave beauty to God’s creation.” He continues on page 60: “Surely we must conclude that God is deeply interested in matters like art, music, architecture, and beauty. And we should also conclude that the Holy Spirit, who is the unchanging God, can be expected to give similar gifts today.” For the Christian, a critical understanding is that the work of the Holy Spirit is not something that replaces or goes beyond what is taught in the Scriptures. As Johnson writes on page 64: “There is the closest possible relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures; whenever people sever the link between the Word of God and the Spirit of God, they will seriously misunderstand both the Word and the Spirit.” He continues on page 66: “The Holy Spirit testifies to the truth and importance of the Word, giving it authority and power which we encounter directly; the Word helps us know what really comes from the Holy Spirit, in contrast with mistaken claims to the work of the Spirit. If we believe in the Third Person of the Trinity, our heart, soul, mind, and strength must be guided by the Word.”

Responding to the Trinity has the following subdivisions: Steps toward a Trinitarian Faith and Life: Is There a Missing or Undeveloped Article in Our Creed?; Is There a Disconnected Article in our Creed?; Competing Particular Beliefs in Regard to the First Article; Competing Particular Beliefs in Regard to the Second Article; Competing Particular Beliefs in Regard to the Third Article; Practical Steps; and The Unity and Complexity of Faith and Life: Beauty and Balance. The purpose of this final chapter is to (1) summarize the main points of the book, (2) make an appeal for individual and corporate evaluation of theological orthodoxy, based on the doctrine of the Trinity, and (3) demonstrate how the doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood and applied, makes for a complete faith, life, and worldview. On page 71, Johnson writes that “The balanced Spirit-filled life will be filled with the fruit of the Spirit while showing great power in fulfilling the cultural mandate, trusting in justification by faith alone, helping people in need, and energetically taking the gospel of Christ to other people.”

There are several important contributions that this book makes. It reinforces the important idea that Christian teachings are not just for personal piety but have very important things to say about all areas of life, and that the doctrine of the Trinity forms a core for developing these ideas. It also has the potential of expanding a Christian’s thinking as to who God is, and how that knowledge points to activities beyond individual salvation and holiness and of His concerns for all areas of life. It is clear that the doctrine of the Trinity is a neglected doctrine in most churches today. Professing belief in that doctrine, and understanding its implications, can range all the way from a simple recitation of the Creed to a detailed, life-long study. The detailed study of this doctrine is nothing less than the study of Christian theology. While those who may desire an in-depth study will likely want to go beyond Johnson’s book to more expansive theological treatises, Johnson’s book should find wide usage in individual and group study. His is a practical and devotional approach to help build the body of Christ.