Scripture and the Nicene Gift

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Abstract

The Nicene Creed's relation to the Bible is neither a solution to a problem the text poses nor an articulation of the judgments of individual passages. In illuminating the movement of the Christian life toward the Father, by the Spirit and in communion with the Son, this Trinitarian creed is a gift.

John Rempel takes the place and point of theology to be "not an attempt to explain God but to worship God with our minds" (110).[1] He rightly suggests that moving away from Trinitarian theological grammar impedes Christian life, not only because the divinity of Christ substantiates authority for Christ's teachings but because Trinitarian grammar clarifies what is expressible in the divine economy. As Scripture witnesses, it is the Spirit who draws us to the Father through the Son, and this action includes reminding us of what Jesus taught, thereby empowering us to follow in the way of his teachings. As Jesus tells the disciples, "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). This statement comes in the midst of a discourse in which he states that those who keep his commandments abide in him, though he is going to the Father. Going to the Father, he sends the Spirit, who teaches and guides his followers in the way that leads to the Father. What is at stake in debates about the Trinity is at the heart of salvation itself. Christian life *is* the Spirit's drawing us, in union with Christ, to the Father.

Scripture invites this way of speaking about Christian life, and Rempel alludes to the biblical bases of Nicene faith in his essay. Offering examples of creative theologians who hold themselves accountable to the doctrine of the Triune God, he critiques J. Denny Weaver and Elizabeth Johnson for

[1] This essay is a response to John Rempel, "An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?", *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 110-45. Page references to Rempel's essay appear in parentheses.

The Conrad Grebel Review 37, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 154-162.

using too narrow a range of biblical texts in addressing the Son's relation to the Father. Weaver "makes little use of the Father-Son relationship in the Synoptics and John or its later expansion in the process of formulating the Nicene Creed" (134), and "without grappling with the wider texture of the NT, Johnson rejects any reference to Jesus' death as obedience to his Father. [. . .] Here her writing verges on a caricature of the Biblical evidence" (137). Moreover, in a postscript Rempel suggests a vision of ongoing reading of Scripture in a church shaped by the Nicene Creed.

However, probing Rempel's view provides an opportunity for developing his proposal at the point of this intersection. Rempel states that "only the model of God as Trinity can make explicit the Bible's implicit claim that Jesus Christ is both divine and human" (110-11). This statement looks to support the biblical basis of Nicaea. It recalls an argument by Lutheran theologian David Yeago that in order to understand Scripture's relationship to the Nicene Creed, we must distinguish and order the concepts and judgments of the text: "the Nicene *homoousion* [. . .] describes a pattern of judgements present *in* the texts, in the texture of scriptural discourse concerning Jesus and the God of Israel."[2] This language of "judgements" and "concepts" differs from Rempel's language of "implicit" and "explicit," but seems a plausible way to interpret what Rempel means. Moreover, Rempel evokes John Howard Yoder[3] for the point that "the Nicene Creed was the only formulation of the disputed God questions of the 4th century that did justice to the implications of New Testament claims" (113). In the following section I describe Yeago's argument and its commonalities with Yoder's account, before turning to a critique of Yeago that suggests how attending to the exegetical character of early Trinitarian debates could advance Rempel's argument, even as it renders more complex the issue of the authority of Nicene faith among heirs of the Radical Reformation.

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[2] David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1994): 153.

[3] [Perhaps the most well-known Mennonite theologian of the 20th century, Yoder is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. Documentation and discussion of these abuses is found at http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/ and in Mennonite Quarterly Review 89, no. 1 (January 2015).—Ed.]

Yeago and Yoder

David Yeago has argued that the earliest Christians, calling on the name of Jesus in worship, already identified him with YHWH, the one God of Israel. In their preaching and worship, the apostles reflected an understanding that "in the resurrection and exaltation the God of Israel has *identified himself* with the particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth."[4] In Philippians 2, Jesus receives "the name above every name," about which "there can be little doubt" that what is meant is the divine name, YHWH.[5] Moreover, the text's allusion to Isa. 45:21-24 is striking, given that the Isaiah passage articulates the incomparability of Israel's God: "for I am God, there is no other." Yet Phil. 2:10-11 identifies this incomparable God with another, namely Jesus. "If 'there is no other,' how can the bending of knees and the loosing of tongues at the name of some other be compatible, much less identified, with the recognition of the 'glory' of the God of Israel?"[6] Yeago concludes that "A strong case can be made that the judgment about Jesus and God made in the Nicene Creed—the judgment that they are 'of one substance' or 'one reality'—is indeed 'the same,' in a basically ordinary and unmysterious way, as that made in a New Testament text such as Philippians 2:6ff."[7]

The editors of John Howard Yoder's *Preface to Theology* emphasize the importance of Phil. 2:5-11 for Yoder's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity: "Nicaea and Chalcedon are but particular outcomes of developments begun in Scripture and, in particular, in the hymn of Philippians 2."[8] Yoder first discusses Phil. 2 in *Preface* in the midst of names and titles for Jesus in the synoptic gospels, noting that "Lord" is "a term that was probably more important than all of the others in the early church."[9] In a Roman worldview "Lord" was used for the worship of Caesar, and in Hebrew "Lord" is the appropriate way to vocalize the unspoken divine name, YHWH.[10] This title

[4] Ibid., 154.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 156.
[7] Ibid., 160.
[8] Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider, "Introduction," in John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 18. The index lists 20 references to this chapter in addition to a nine-page section devoted to it.
[9] Ibid., 71.
[10] Ibid., 72.

"is the center of the early Christian confession of faith. This was the strongest thing that the early church could say about Jesus."[11] This statement is almost identical to Yeago's on the confession "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11): "Within the thought-world of Israel's Scriptures, no stronger affirmation of the bond between the risen Jesus and the God of Israel is possible."[12]

Summarizing his argument on the biblical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity, Yoder says this: "That there is God the Father, that there is the Son, that there is the Spirit—and that these three are the same—*that* much we can find in the Bible."[13] In this passage, which Rempel quotes, Yoder suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity has arisen because of an "intellectual difficulty" or a "word problem" arising from biblical statements about God. While Yeago understands the Nicene Creed as an articulation of the judgments of Phil. 2:5-11, Yoder views it as one solution to the difficulty the text poses. For him, this particular articulation of the solution is not authoritative, although the problem is. This point is important because, as Rempel moves beyond Yoder in advocating for Nicene language, so his argument becomes open to being taken in a direction even more akin to Yeago's argument.

Yoder's way of framing the matter should be understood in light of his context; he builds on the state of theological education in 1960. This may explain his failure to account for the exegetical nature of early Trinitarian debates and his indebtedness to a contrast between Hebrew and Greek languages and philosophical outlooks.[14] These limitations affect his account of the post-apostolic period, whereas his account of the writing of the NT is more historically and exegetically nuanced.

Yoder's extended exegesis of Phil. 2 differs instructively from Yeago's account in that Yoder recognizes the openness of the passage to multiple interpretations. First, he suggests that there are two "obvious" ways of taking the references to image/form and equality. One is to say that image/form and equality are parallel, identical, the same—and that this is what Christ gave up. He emptied himself; this is his *kenosis*. So, "the form of God" is

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[11] Ibid., 73.

[12] Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 155.

[13] Yoder, *Preface*, 204.

[14] Hauerwas and Sider, "Introduction" to *Preface*, 22-23.

more or less equivalent to the Greek *doxa* and to the Hebrew *kabod*. Yoder brings several OT and NT texts together to reflect on what this "form" might mean, arguing that it is more Hebraic to think of it as "light" (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6; Rev. 21:23; Exod. 24:10; Rev. 4:3). If this is so, various meanings of *kenosis* are possible.[15]

Second, Yoder observes that another interpretation says that equality with God was not something that Christ originally possessed, but was something within his grasp that he chose not to seize, unlike Adam, who strove to be like God. "After the model of what Adam should have done," Christ refused "to seize that which was not yet his;" he refused disobedience.[16] The same question can be posed with regard to the lordship of Jesus. Is the "now" in which "every knee shall bow" from eternity (that is, pre-existent), or "is this exaltation the reward, the results, and the recompense for his humiliation and his death"?[17] Many will think it is "simply the unveiling of what was always the case."[18] While either reading is plausible, Yoder suggests that the reward or results reading was intended by the author but the "pre-existent" reading later became preferred. The former is "the more literal, the more historical, and therefore, on general grounds, the more likely reading."[19] However, this reading loses force in the canon as NT authors, responding to their own contexts, identify Christ with creation, suggesting something like the later notion of pre-existence,[20] place Christ above the OT story as its fulfillment, and further develop their understanding of incarnation. Therefore, the reading of Phil. 2 suggesting that Jesus *became* the Son (or Lord) through obedience gives way to the sense that "equality with God" suggests "a *prior* divine dignity of some kind."[21]

In sum, Yoder acknowledges the plausibility of multiple readings of Phil. 2:5-11 and the influence of cultural and philosophical contexts on theological statements within the text. I suggest that Rempel and his readers

[15] Yoder, *Preface*, 82-83.
[16] Ibid., 84.
[17] Ibid., 86.
[18] Ibid., 86.
[19] Ibid., 87.
[20] Ibid., 123.
[21] Ibid., 124.

should follow this more nuanced direction of Yoder's work rather than adhere to the similarities Yoder shares with Yeago. I now turn to a recent critique of Yeago to demonstrate why.

A Critique of Yeago and Yoder

Lewis Ayres, a leading scholar of early Christian exegesis and Trinitarian theology,[22] recently addressed Yeago's proposal for understanding the relationship between Nicene Trinitarianism and the NT, questioning whether what Yeago takes to be the implicit *authoritative* judgments of the text are not simply part of a range of *possible* judgments as Yoder suggested.[23] To demonstrate this, Ayres summarizes two 4th-century readings of Phil. 2:9-10.

In his first *Oration Against the Arians*, Athanasius addresses his opponent's argument that the "therefore" in 2:9 suggests the mutability of the Son, whose status changes at the point of his exaltation. Ayres points out that Athanasius's prior discussion of whether the term "unbegotten" applies to the Son or only to the Father has a bearing on how he reads 2:9-10. Moreover, Athanasius first references his earlier discussion of the Word's status, in which he argued, using Rom. 1:20, 1 Cor. 1:24, and Isa. 40:28, that since the Father is eternal, the Father's power—that is, the Son—must also be eternal. Athanasius's opponents seem to suggest that the Father is his own power when they speak of the Son as an "image" of the Father's power, but Athanasius argues that the Father cannot be his own eternal power.

Turning to Phil. 2:9-10, Athanasius argues for the Son's unchangeability, citing texts that include Heb. 13:8, 1:12; Mal. 3:6; and Ps. 102:26. Ayres emphases Ps. 102:26, which suggests that the created order is distinct from the Lord in its changeability, the Lord being unchangeable. If this is

[22] See especially Lewis Ayres, "Scripture in the Trinitarian Controversies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 339-454; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004); and Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

[23] Lewis Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'in' the Scriptures?" Presentation given at the "Theological Exegesis: Scriptural Theology" conference, Rome February 2019: https://youtu.be/cvpF5PsPAtA. Ayres makes similar observations about Athanasius's strategies for reading Prov. 8:22 in "Scripture in the Trinitarian Controversies," 440-46.

so, "therefore" cannot mean that that Christ's exaltation and humiliation indicates a change in essence as a result of his humiliation. For Athanasius, the exaltation in Phil. 2:9 refers to the Son's humanity. Other texts support this view, showing the presence of the Son with the Father in the beginning (Prov. 8:30, John 17:5, Matt. 11:27, John 10:35).

In his discussion, Athanasius argues in two ways. First, he brings in a host of other texts to answer the question about Phil. 2:9. Any one of these texts may be taken differently apart from the chain in which they appear. By not simply arguing from within the whole passage, he recognizes that the passage on its own may be taken otherwise. Second, he brings in a host of conceptual resources from his own context—such as the distinction between creator and creation and the nature of eternity. His argument cannot be understood apart from these wider philosophical resources and the definitions and distinctions he makes of and between key terms such as unbegotten, image, word, and power.

Ayres then summarizes Eusebius's rather different reading of Phil. 2:9-10 in *Ecclesiastical Theology*. Eusebius writes against Marcellus of Ancyra, who taught that the word of God came forth only for the purpose of creation. Eusebius states that the Son is the eternally existing image of God through whom things are made; the Son is light, life, rock, and radiance. Thus, the statement in Philippians that Christ was "in the form of God" must be read alongside his designations as mediator (Gal. 3:19-20) and image. The Son is distinct from the Father, but as the Father's radiance is an offspring like no other. There is one God (Deut. 4:35), but the Son may also be called God because God is in him as in an image. There is marked difference between Athanasius and Eusebius in their use of key terms. Athanasius's trajectory is toward understanding that anything identified with God must be completely united. Eusebius's emphasis on image suggests that the Son has or receives the Father's form secondarily, which allows terms like "radiance" to have a different meaning than for Athanasius. Eusebius, drawing on extra-biblical and biblical resources rather differently, imagines a lesser being (Word or Son) who is God in that he uniquely receives some characteristics of the Father.

A Circular Movement

Clearly, the Nicene Creed's relation to the Bible is not well described as either a solution to a problem the text poses (Yoder) or as an articulation of the judgments of individual passages (Yeago). Trinitarian debates of the early centuries and in our own day are rather more complex than these options. In light of this, Rempel's statement that "only the model of God as Trinity can make explicit the Bible's implicit claim that Jesus Christ is both human and divine" (110-11) could be nuanced with attention to the exegetical character of early Trinitarian debate.

Moreover, if we cannot say that the Bible hands us an understanding of the Father, Son, and Spirit as "the same" in an obvious way, then articulating the doctrine of the Trinity requires a continual returning to the text of Scripture, drawing on a range of biblical and extra-biblical resources to consider the mystery of the Triune divine life. Such a reading can, and should, engage readings incompatible with the Nicene Creed, given that they might offer plausible accounts of the plain sense of individual passages. Those shaped by Nicaea do well to be as honest as possible about how this affects their reading of Scripture.

In his postscript, Rempel suggests the purpose of doctrine is to provide guidance for Christians' ongoing reading of Scripture. He envisions "a circular movement between the Bible and the church" whereby "'tradition' is made up of each generation's engagement with Scripture, building on all previous ones" (144). He seems to be testing this idea, his description more suggestive than exact. He appears to be moving away from the kind of Anabaptist view voiced, for example by James McClendon, that "the church now is the primitive church."[24] For Rempel, the church today receives and builds on the understandings of her predecessors. Robert Barron, critiquing McClendon, draws on John Henry Newman's image of a tree, which as it grows "sends off errant shoots, fights disease, and endures deformations both life-threatening and trivial, all the while maintained in its integrity by the on-going work of the Holy Spirit."[25] Likewise, I wonder if an organic image,

[24] James William McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology, vol. 1: Ethics*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 30.

[25] Robert Barron, "Considering the Systematic Theology of James William McClendon, Jr.," *Modern Theology* 18, no. 2 (2002): 270.

such as the Newmanian tree, would help Rempel to nuance his account.

For Rempel, this building—or growing—tradition must include the Nicene Creed, as when he states that "no subsequent engagement with God's threesome-ness can say less than Nicaea" (144). But even the models of "Radical Trinitarianism" that he gives are not all Nicene. So, why *Nicaea*? One answer—that the plain sense of the Bible requires the Nicene Creed—I suggest we eliminate, though biblical arguments for Nicene Trinitarianism can, and should, be made. Another answer is that, in its articulation of the movement of the Christian life toward the Father, by the Spirit and in communion with the Son, the Nicene Creed is a gift to be received.

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