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John Calvin's Biblicism and the Doctrine of the Trinity: a Constructive Retrieval for Theology, Ministry, and Social Witness

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Abstract

This article examines John Calvin's approach to the concept of the Trinity—that God is three-in-one while emphasising his insistence on a biblically grounded Trinitarian theology that resists speculation. The article will then argue that retrieving John Calvin's biblical Trinitarianism can furnish contemporary theologians with a constructive way forward for navigating the present malady of fragmentation between exegesis, doctrine, and public witness namely, that theology needs to be defined in terms of the economy of salvation found in scripture that in turn points to ethical and liturgical practice rooted in the relational justice of the Triune God. Calvin's Trinitarianism is both exegetically rich, solidly biblical, and attentive to the creedal and theological milieu of the early church. In its historical and theological context, this study employs the Historical Retrieval and Reappropriation method to do historical study on Calvin's Trinitarianism. By retrieving Calvin's biblical Trinitarianism, the article shows its continuing significance for today's theological reflection, not least as a constructive bridge between biblical studies and systematic theology, disciplines that are frequently treated in isolation from one another in more recent centuries.

Introduction

Contemporary theology is afflicted with a kind of methodological fragmentation in which biblical exegesis and systematic theology seem

sundered more than ever, if not completely torn apart. On one front, much of biblical studies prioritises historical-critical methods that approach Scripture mainly as an ancient text, to be unpacked through tools imported from linguistics, archaeology, and literary criticism. Although these approaches provide valuable historical perspectives, they abstract away the dogmatic and theological significance of Scripture; the doctrine is often untouched by the exegetical process (Osborne 2006:23). In contrast, systematic theology can build elaborate doctrinal constructs which, despite their sophistication, do not ground themselves deeply in the exegetical evidence of the biblical text (Vanhoozer 2005:15). This disjuncture initiates an erosion of theological coherence, leaving doctrines that fall into the pit of seeming abstract, speculative, as if floating above the lived realities of faith and practice.

This methodological gap has other implications for the church's public witness. If theology becomes disconnected from its organic basis in Scripture, the church can potentially root its ethical and social engagement in ideology or cultural fashions rather than the revealed character and purposes of God. The result is a theological vision that is unable to relate the central dynamic of divine self-revelation to the urgent social, ethical, and cultural concerns of contemporary communities in any meaningful way. But when divorced from biblical notions of the economy of salvation, theological reflection loses its scriptural authority and prophetic clarity.

This article aims to heal that fragmentation by retrieving John Calvin's biblicism—a hermeneutical posture that resists speculative theology by necessity and contends that doctrine must flow directly from the text of Scripture, understood to be the progressive history of God's salvific act. For Calvin, the Trinity is not an abstract philosophical determination, but a truth revealed in the biblical narrative itself, particularly in the economy of salvation as the actions of the Father, Son, and Spirit come together in a plan of redemption. Calvin's strong resistance to speculative metaphysics and his insistence on the primacy of biblical exegesis shaped his Trinitarian theology as a revealed mystery rather than a rational construct (Muller 2003:95). Because Calvin roots the doctrine of the Trinity in the exegesis of Scripture so deeply, however, he models an integrated theological method, in which exegesis and doctrinal development are not opposed disciplines but mutually enriching ones.

This study employs the historical retrieval and reappropriation methodology to reclaim and reappropriate Calvin's biblicism for today. Webster (2007:234) argues that theological retrieval is not mere antiquarianism but a conscious attempt to harvest theological wealth from a time gone by for the sake of enriching present theological imagination and the public witness of the church. This article considers Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity (in its historical, exegetical, and theological contexts) not merely to understand Calvin the historical character but as a constructive resource for contemporary theological reflection. A biblicism as implicit in Calvin offers not merely a bridge between exegesis and systematic theology, but a theological scaffolding affording the possibility of grounding the doctrinal and ethical reflection of the church in the triune identity of God as revealed in Scripture.

Calvin's Hermeneutical Context: Precritical Exegesis and Reformational Biblicism

John Calvin's biblicism emerges from his trajectory into the humanist exegetical stream, which aimed at the literal meaning of Scripture while keeping exegesis accountable to the received doctrine the rule of faith—the centre of its credal and theological inheritance (Steinmetz 1994). In his work as a Reformer, Calvin walks a thin line between excessive speculative metaphysical theology represented by some medieval scholasticism on one side and the tendency towards uncontrolled allegorical interpretations in patristic and medieval exegesis on the other. To Calvin, Scripture was not an open canvas for creative theological imagination; Scripture was the school of the Holy Spirit, the divinely given text through which God reveals to us both Himself and His will (*Institutes*, 1.6.3).

This hermeneutical posture is much more than a method; it expresses a profound theological conviction on the part of Calvin that God can only be known as He makes Himself known. To this end, Calvin's doctrine of accommodation helps justify this approach by emphasising that the infinite, incomprehensible God condescends to finite human capacity to reveal Himself to us using human language, images, and historical action (*Institutes*, 1.13.1). Hence for Calvin, a faithful theology must conform to the contours of divine revelation itself so that doctrine arises directly from Scripture and not

speculative reasoning based on God's essence independent of his revealed works.

Calvin's hermeneutical methodology also reflects his understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture though certainly not of all of its passages—in that the central meaning of Scripture the knowledge of God and salvation is perspicuous enough to any careful reader guided by the Spirit (*Institutes*, 1.7.1). These above-mentioned convictions regarding the clarity of the Scripture and then, with it, Calvin's belief that Scripture is a coherent divine revelation, enable Calvin to work doctrine out of careful exegesis — tracing the whole counsel of God through the biblical canon. Exegesis and theology, in Calvin's eyes, are not distinct fields but rather they are two sides of the same coin, with theology serving exegesis in preserving the rule of faith and exegesis serving theology in continually rooting doctrinal reflection in the text itself (Steinmetz 1994).

This precritical yet methodologically rigorous framework enables Calvin to fashion a reformational biblicism that is both deeply exegetical and robustly theological. Instead of reducing theology to proof-texting, his method integrates biblical narrative, historical context, and doctrinal synthesis in a way that yields a Trinitarian theology that grows organically out of the economy of salvation as presented in Scripture. This hermeneutical endeavour determined a great deal about Reformed theology over the centuries, but affords, as well, a constructive model for contemporary theologians wishing to reconnect exegesis and doctrine after the dislocation wrought by modern critical methods.

Biblicism in Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity

In Book 1, Chapter 13 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin grounds his doctrine of the Trinity not in abstract metaphysical speculation but in a close reading of the biblical economy of salvation. For Calvin, the sending of the Son into the world (John 3:16) is not just a historical event; it can tell us something eternal about the Son — that is, that the Son is the eternally begotten Son of the Father. So too, the mission of the Spirit in redemptive history (John 14:26) discloses the Spirit's eternal procession from the Father and the Son (*Institutes*, 1.13.25). This biblicism guards Calvin's trinitarian

doctrine from being held apart from the self-revelation of God found within the words of Scripture itself and speculation that comes ulterior to the biblical text.

This scriptural basis enables Calvin to combat two frequent theological mistakes. In the first, he rejects the separation of the economic and immanent Trinity thus the notion that God's actions in history (the economic Trinity) can be divorced from God's eternal creation (the immanent Trinity)—a theological heresy. Rather, Calvin holds, God's works in the history of life tell the truth about God's eternal self. This much, and indeed much more, can already be said: The economic roles of the Son and the Spirit also shed light on the eternal relations in the Godhead. This position would later shape the Reformed tradition's insistence that the economic Trinity reflects the immanent Trinity (Muller 2003:95).

Second, Calvin's biblicism avoids the opposite error. In this case, what may be called a functional unitarianism namely, the tendency to get lost in the details of what God does in history, which is found in some strands of biblicism, but which then never steps back to ask the deeper eternal question of who God is. Calvin argues that the Scripture's redemptive narrative reveals the triune God, and as such must proceed from the economy to the immanent life of God (*Institutes*, 1.13.21). Calvin asserts that, the doctrine of the Trinity does not get imposed from above onto Scripture; rather, it is the natural integration that emerges from the shape of the biblical story—a story where the Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit to effect redemption and lead the church into truth (John 14:26; 15:26).

Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism exemplifies his more general hermeneutical conviction that theology is nothing other than properly ordered exegesis of Scripture considering Christ. His Trinitarian doctrine does not, therefore, cleave biblical exegesis from dogmatic formulation, but keeps them in creative tension with one another, allowing exegesis to inform dogma and dogma to provide hermeneutical guidance in the task of faithfully interpreting Scripture. The movement of the interpretive energy of the tradition from Scripture to doctrine to hermeneutic framework is, to my mind, a healthy and necessary structure for theologians today who wish to retrieve a robust theological

reading of Scripture that is at once materially exegetically responsible and formally doctrinally grounded in tradition (Steinmetz 1994).

Calvin's Biblicism in Polemic Context: Rejecting Speculation and Anti-Trinitarianism

Calvin's commitment to biblicism did not develop in a theological vacuum; it was honed in the crucible of his polemics against anti-Trinitarianism, especially in his controversy with Michael Servetus. Because of his skepticism towards post-apostolic doctrinal developments, Servetus rejected both the eternal generation of the Son and the personal distinction within the Godhead, dismissing the doctrine of the Trinity as nothing more than an abstract, philosophical imposition upon the Scriptures (Steinmetz 1994:72-74). For Servetus, biblical language of Father, Son, and Spirit applied only to God's outward works and did not also refer to eternal relations in God's being.

Calvin's answer was a rich exercise in exegesis, polemics. In the first part of his *Defence of the Orthodox Faith against the Errors of Michael Servetus* (1554), Calvin maintains that the missions of the Son and Spirit in history reveal their eternal relations within the Godhead: the sending of the Son reveals his eternal generation, and the mission of the Spirit reveals his eternal procession (*Institutes*, 1.13.21). The basis for theological error, for Calvin, is speculation on the essence of God apart from the Scriptures whether through rationalist denial of the Trinity or scholastic metaphysical surplus (Muller 2003:96).

This polemical setting strengthened Calvin's biblicism as a theological bulwark. The binding of doctrinal reflection to the economy of salvation protected theology from two errors, then: (1) the speculative detachment of doctrine from biblical exegesis, and (2) the rationalist flattening of divine mystery into merely functional descriptions of God's work. Calvin insisted that God can be known only through His self-disclosure and that disclosure happens in the canonical Scriptures, in which the Father sends the Son and the Spirit in redemptive activity (*Institutes*, 1.6.3).

For Calvin, the immanent Trinity, that is the eternal relations within God, cannot be separated from the economic Trinity, the acts of God in redemptive history without losing the very shape of God who is (Webster 2007:237). This

biblicism kept the mystery of the Triune God grounded in the exegetical soil of Scripture. So, Calvin's way was not simply a hermeneutical option, but a dogmatic stance, forged in the heat of polemical battle, arguing for biblical and creedal faith over and against anti-Trinitarian revisionism.

Case Studies in Calvin's Commentary

John Calvin's devotion to biblicism, his unwillingness to clearly differentiate between doctrine and the narrative of Scripture receives its most clear articulation not in his Institutes but in his biblical commentaries, where his exegetical, doctrinal, and pastoral interests meet. According to Calvin, Scripture is not just a database of proof-texts to support pre-determined theological systems, but doctrine emerges organically from careful exegesis, governed by the rule of faith and read within the context of the unfolding story of redemption.

Calvin's commentaries must be taken together revealing a consistent hermeneutical posture, that is the handling of texts with historical sensitivity, canonical interpretation, and ultimately relation to the redemptive work of the triune God. Calvin's Trinitarian theology, therefore, is not some abstract theory that he imposes on the text but is born and grows organically within the economy of salvation as that brings itself to light through the biblical narrative.

The case studies that follow, of course, reflect this hermeneutical and doctrinal combination, coming from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. These examples show something of Calvin's confidence that Scripture itself instructs on the doctrine of the Trinity, not through speculative reasoning but through the decisive acts of the Father, Son, and Spirit in history. In every instance, Calvin's exegesis, doctrinal construction, and liturgical sensitivity coalesces into an integrated theological method, providing a constructive model of theology for today.

Case Study 1: Matthew 28:19 — The Triune Name in the Great Commission

A particularly clear display of Calvin's biblicism in action is found in his commentary on Matthew 28:19. In this text Jesus instructs the disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, a verse

commonly used as a proof-text for the doctrine of the Trinity. But Calvin very explicitly refuses to view this text in isolation as pure doctrinal evidence. Rather, he reads it in light of the revealed identity of God, sensing the Great Commission both as a command for the mission of the church, and as theological revelation regarding the nature of God as Trinity (*Comm.*, Matt. 28:19).

For Calvin, this trinitarian formula enshrined in the baptismal command reveals more than a doctrinal proposition; it discloses the very name and nature of the triune God. To be baptised into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be inducted into the economy of grace, whereby the Father elects, the Son redeems, and the Spirit sanctifies. This robust, theological interpretation of Matthew 28:19 serves to exemplify Calvin's conviction about the connection between Scripture's witness to the triune God and the redemptive acts of God that are revealed in the very biblical narratives in question.

True to his biblicism, Calvin does not hyphenate exegesis, doctrine, and worship. For him, Matthew 28:19 is not just a theological text undergirding the Trinity, it is also a liturgical text that channels how the church baptises new believers. In Calvin's hermeneutic, doctrine and liturgy mutually support one another. Baptism is not an abstract religious ceremony; it is a Trinitarian act, a visible token of the believers' sharing in the life and grace of the triune God (*Comm.*, Matt. 28:19). This integrative reading, in which exegesis informs doctrine, which informs worship, which bears witness to the reality revealed in Scripture, points to the coherence at the heart of Calvin's theological method.

Moreover, Calvin's insistence against severing the Scriptural witness from dogmatic and liturgical interest sets a precedent for modern-day pleas for a theological reading of Scripture—one which means to engage biblical texts according to the faith of the church within the theological coherence of the canon (Steinmetz 1994). In this regard, Calvin's commentary on Matthew 28:19 serves as a case study in his biblically saturated Trinitarian theology rooted in the economy of salvation and organically tied to the worship and confession of God's people.

Case Study 2: Genesis 1:26 — “Let Us Make Man.”

In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Calvin views the well-known plural “Let us make man in our image” as not a rhetorical flourish or a colloquy between God and the angels but a direct indication of the Trinity. To Calvin, this soliloquy of God provides insight into the eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit, whose relationships were already being worked out and active in creation. This plural contrasts with re-examination of the plural through parallel Ancient Near Eastern or literary trope interpretations. Calvin does not simply lay out doctrine systematically; rather, he allows doctrine to flow directly from the text of Scripture itself, which highlights Calvin’s biblicism par excellence, allowing the internal logic and voice of the text to carry the day instead of philosophical or cultural paradigms from outside Scripture. In such an interpretation of Genesis 1:26, Calvin not only grounds his doctrine of the Trinity within the very fibre of creation but shows the ways in which God’s triune being shapes even the way humanity comes to be (*Comm.*, Gen. 1:26).

Calvin’s exegesis of Genesis 1:26 also reflects his more general theological conviction that the economy of God’s external works discloses the immanent life of the Triune God. The shared work of Father, Son, Spirit, in creation is not simply a division of labour or an exposition of numbers, but a revelation of the relationship of their ever having from the Godhead. For Calvin, this Trinitarian shape to the created order also has deep implications for the meaning of personhood. To be made in God’s image does not just mean rationality, creativity, or dominion over creation; it also means being made for relationship, community, and mutuality. As the Triune God shares in eternal communion, human beings made in that relational image are called to express that communion in how they relate to one another. Even in his doctrine of creation does Calvin’s Trinitarian biblicism knit exegesis, doctrine, and ethics together as an integrated, inseparable whole (*Comm.*, Gen. 1:26).

Such a focus on relationality, rooted in Calvin’s Trinitarian reading of Genesis, indicates the ethical and social implications of his theology. To be human is to be with and for others, following the eternal love and mutuality that is shared between Father, Son, and Spirit. For Calvin, your task is to reproduce the love of God in Christ by being God’s covenantal image-bearer, becoming people, whose truest operation lies with and for others; mission (as modelling how God loves) emerges through the human phenomenon. This Trinitarian

anthropology is in direct opposition to both the atomistic individualism and cultural isolationism that characterizes many modern conceptions of the self. Rather, it beckons human beings into lives of mutual service, hospitality, and communal care. In this regard, Calvin's doctrine of creation anticipates his expansive vision of an ethic in which the love that flows within the triune God is a key to human justice, compassion and the common good. By grounding these ethical imperatives in the very nature of God, Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism does not allow for a divorce between theology and practice what God eternally is, humanity is called to embody temporally.

Case Study 3: Isaiah 63:9-10 — The Triune Redeemer of the OT

In his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Calvin proceeds to present a distinctly Trinitarian interpretation of Isaiah 63:9–10, a passage of God's redemptive action toward Israel containing both the Angel of His Presence and the Spirit of Holiness. Calvin recognises the Angel of His Presence as a theophany of the Son, Christ, who takes part in the redemption of Israel. Then, even while the Spirit grieves over Israel's rebellion, this avers the Spirit's personal investment in God's covenant relationship with His people. And for Calvin, this passage is more than a description of a historical event; he finds in it an incipient vision of the unity of the Godhead acting through different persons and functions within the context of the economy of salvation (*Comm.*, Isa. 63:9-10).

Calvin's understanding of this text articulates his more expansive theological claim that the Old Testament only makes sense in the light of the Trinity. To Calvin, the Triune God did not evolve over the course of redemptive history, as if the doctrine of the Trinity was solely a New Testament phenomenon. No, the Father, Son, and Spirit have always been actively engaged in creation, providence, and redemption so the Old Testament Israel meets with the Triune God, not some sort of generalised monotheistic deity. God's covenantal actions in history delivering, grieving, showing mercy are always the unified progress of the united work of Father, Son, and Spirit. This inner harmony between Old Testament revelation and Trinitarian doctrine bolsters Calvin's conviction that faithful exegesis, sound doctrinal formulation, and proper worship all function as checks upon one another in their concordant testimony to the same truth: that the one God, exists eternally in three persons.

This Trinitarian reading of Isaiah 63 also exemplifies Calvin's broader theological method, whereby exegesis becomes the seedbed for doctrinal and liturgical development. Calvin emphasised that reading Scripture theologically does not involve imposing a system of doctrine upon the text but rather understanding the text as disclosing the Trinity of God, when read canonically and covenantally. This is a hermeneutical commitment but also a pastoral one. Calvin was seeking to root Christian worship and piety in a fully Trinitarian concept of God by training the church to see Father, Son, and Spirit active across all of Scripture. So, for Calvin, an exegesis of the Old Testament is not only a matter of history, but also a matter of worship that involves teaching the church how to rightly understand and rightly worship the one God in three persons.

Case Study 4: John 1:1 — The Pre-Existent Word

Calvin's exegesis is there in Commentary on John where he cannot distinguish economic unveiling/exposure and ontic substance as he writes of John 1:1. The Word's action in creation and redemption reveals the eternal Son–Father relation. Calvin maintains that the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Word is not imported from the outside but rests upon biblical insider language: the Word was both with God and was God (*Comm.*, John 1:1). This reading functions at the level of doctrine and exegesis alike, all at once demonstrating that the doctrine of the Trinity does not rest, as it is often accused of doing, on proof-texts ripped from their context, but emerges from the fabric of the whole economy of salvation. To Calvin, the work of Scripture's inward and outward history in its unfolding revelation from creation to incarnation to redemption which proceeds from one divine source, mediated in historical difference by the Son and the Spirit, and disclosed in diverse form throughout the breadth of the canon.

It also highlights Calvin's belief that the authority of Scripture lies in its divine origin — God speaking himself. Calvin pinpoints out that, John 1:1 lays the groundwork for Trinitarian theology, not only because it presents the Word in a deifying sense (the Word was God) but because it does so in a relational one (the Word was with God). This double movement corresponds to the inner life of the Trinity: the Son is of one essence with the Father and yet eternally distinct as a Person. So, for Calvin, responsible exegesis needs to encompass both the economic and ontological implications of the text, so that the God

who speaks to, and acts in, history is the same God who eternally exists, in the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit.

This Trinitarian reading of John 1:1 also mirrors Calvin's broader theological approach, in which exegesis leads directly to worship. For to confess the Word as both with God and God is not merely a dogmatic conclusion, but a liturgical and doxological necessity. Calvin is concerned not only to clear up what the text means but to instruct the church on how to confess aright the God that is encountered in the Gospel. Calvin asserted that, John 1:1 is the not abstract metaphysics, but root of Christian devotion, rooting all prayer and praise and proclamation in the reality of the Triune God revealed in the face of Christ. So, Calvin's treatment of this text is a model of his conviction that biblical interpretation, doctrinal formulation, and the life of worship must always move together, each deepening and guarding the others.

Case Study 5: Romans 8:11 — The Spirit and Resurrection

In his commentary on Romans 8:11, Calvin considers the Spirit's part in the resurrection of believers. According to Calvin, the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is the exact same Spirit who dwells in believers, giving them a share of Christ's victory over death. Calvin situates this passage in the full sweep of redemptive history, as the Father raises the Son through the Spirit and the Spirit now applies that resurrection life to the church (*Comm.*, Rom. 8:11).

Here Calvin's biblicism, once again, resists fragmentation. Exegesis, doctrine, and hope coalesce into a Trinitarian eschatology. Resurrection is much more than a future event; it is the revelation of the power of the Triune God and the faithfulness of the covenant God. The church's hope, therefore, is not based on speculative end-times programs, but on the constant action of the Triune God—the same Spirit who brooded over creation (Gen. 1:2), who raised up Christ (Rom. 8:11), who indwells believers now (Rom. 8:15). Calvin's reading of Romans 8 therefore serves as a concrete example of his belief that Trinitarian doctrine grows organically in the soil of careful biblical exegesis, and not from philosophical imposition.

This resurrection as the third hypostasis sheds light also on Calvin's view of the Christian life in the now. For Calvin, the indwelling of the Spirit is not a static reality but rather a foretaste and guarantee of future glory. By no means are

the Spirit's present work in sanctification and spiritual renewal separate from the Spirit's future work in resurrection. In this way Calvin relates eschatology to ethics: those joined with Christ by the Spirit already share in the power of the age to come and are thus summoned to live as people marked by resurrection hope. This aspect is ethical, as the practical force of Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism about what God has done, is doing, what God will do in the triune economy forms not merely Christian belief but also Christian living.

Case Study 6: II Corinthians 13:14 — The Trinitarian Benediction

Calvin even interprets Paul's Trinitarian benediction— "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" both as liturgical and doctrinal confession in his Commentary on 2 Corinthians (*Comm.*, 2 Cor. 13:14). This blessing proclaimed over the church professes the saving nature of our triune God. What we see here is the inseparable operations of the Trinity: the Father's initiating love, the Son's redeeming grace, and the Spirit's unifying fellowship, Calvin observes.

According to Calvin, this text exemplifies his belief that doctrine should be in the church's worship. Theology is not an abstract intellectual pursuit but see the great theological revelations of Scripture as the springboard for our communal praise, blessing, and mission. What you find in the triune God of Scripture is the God who is present in worship, blessing the gathered community and sending them out into the world. This commentary illustrates an aspect of Calvin's biblicism that pushes against the modern fragmentation between exegesis, doctrine, and worship. To Calvin, the rhythmic forms of the church's liturgical life are themselves acts of theology, in that the triune God's name is confessed and encountered.

The proximity of worship and doctrine in Calvin's thought, moreover, underscores his pastoral concern for the spiritual health of the church. The church, Calvin said, does not simply study the Trinity rather it lives and prays within the reality of the Triune God. The benediction is not an exasperated theological appendix, but an ongoing time where the covenantal God, Father, Son, and Spirit, actually pours grace, love, and fellowship forth into the people of God. This exchange trains the church to understand all life in the light of *coram Deo* — living before the face of the Triune God. Hence, for Calvin, Trinitarian doctrine, biblical exegesis, and communal worship all merge into a

theological spirituality where knowing the Triune God is directly incorporated into worshiping and living in communion with Him.

Contemporary Theological Method: Fragmentation and Retrieval

An important characteristic of contemporary theology is methodological fragmentation, the severing of the ground relationship between biblical exegesis and doctrinal theology. Contemporary biblical scholarship often centres around the historical-critical approach, treating the Bible predominantly as a historical document to be analysed with philological, archaeological, and literary instruments. While this method has produced some worthwhile results in helping us understand the historical backgrounds of Scripture (i.e. history, socio-political structures, etc.), it has more often than not left biblical study free from the larger theological project, leaving dogma relevantly untouched from careful explanation of the biblical text that these doctrines are based on. Systematic theology, in contrast, tends to build doctrinal systems employing inherited theological categories, but often minimally engaging with the actual movement of the biblical narrative (Vanhoozer 2015:56). This methodological fracturing might have helped give rise to two unfortunate realities: theology without biblical studies and biblical studies without theology.

This fragmentation is not merely an academic inconvenience but rather threatens the very coherence of theological reflection. Exegesis is separated from doctrine and a chasm exists between the academy and the church, with the biblical scholar considered to be a historian of ancient texts (given that these texts are dead), and the theologian a speculative system builder working from ideas inherited rather than being rooted in the living Word of God. This disconnect undermines not only good theological coherence but also the church's preaching, worship and ecclesial formation, because the doctrinal content of the faith becomes adrift from the story and authority of Scripture.

In contrast to this backdrop, retrieval theology has surfaced as an important modern movement seeking to recover pre-modern theological methodologies (especially those that synthesise exegesis and doctrine in a mutually enriching relationship). Perhaps especially helpful for such retrieval is John Calvin's

biblicism. In Calvin's view, exegesis and doctrine are not competitors; they are deeply interwoven, such that doctrine flows from faithful exegesis and envisions the church's ongoing work of interpreting Scripture. Indeed, his Trinitarian theology does not impose a metaphysical framework onto Scripture but is drawn directly from the biblical economy of salvation evidenced in the missions of the Son and Spirit. This return to Calvin's method of hermeneutics and doctrine holds great potential, not only for the sake of theological consistency, but also for the reformation of preaching, worship, and ecclesial formation, for which the connection between the unity of Scripture, doctrine, and spiritual formation is key to the lifeblood of the church.

Retrieval, however, is different from romanticising the past or trying to recreate a premodern world. Rather than picking and choosing elements of an old ecclesial witness for modern consumption, retrieval theology, especially when pursuing historic retrieval guided by the historical retrieval and reappropriation method, aims to retrieve historic theological wisdom and reappropriate it for contemporary contexts and questions (Webster 2007:231). In this regard, Calvin's biblicism provides not merely a historical model, but a theological resource for how to address modern fragmentation by demonstrating how doctrine and exegesis, theology and worship, text and tradition can and must work together in a unified theological method.

The Triune God and Public Witness: a Social Implication of Calvin's Biblicism

Retrieving Calvin's biblicism does more than supply a theological method; it has important ethical and social implications as well. For Calvin, knowledge of God is never simply an intellectual exercise—true knowledge of the triune God must impact how believers live in community and relate with one another (*Institutes*, 3.7.6). Such a conviction depends, then, on Calvin having understood God's self-revelation as relational and covenantal. The triune God is not only sovereign Creator but covenant-keeping Redeemer, who's relational sending thus the Father sending the Son, and the Spirit sets the very pattern for covenantal faithfulness in human life. In this way, Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism does not merely give theological coherence; it supplies the moral grammar for the church's public witness.

This interrelationships between theology and ethics are woven into the very fabric of the biblical narrative. In fact, throughout Scripture, God's redemptive actions are always actions of justice for the oppressed and vulnerable. God sets free enslaved Israel (Exod. 6:6), commands concern for the widow, orphan, and alien (Exod. 22:21-23), and condemns nations because they have done violence to the poor (Isa. 1:17). These are, however, not isolated ethical imperatives—they are an expression of God's own character as the covenantal Lord who acts throughout history to ensure justice followed by mercy. This economic action of God which is disclosed in redemptive history is for Calvin itself a moral paradigm for the life of the covenant community. The God who sends a Son and a Spirit into the world to accomplish salvation sends the church into public life to reflect his justice and mercy (*Institutes*, 2.8.54).

This unbreakable link between theology and ethics can read as a challenge to certain modern theological currents. On the progressive side, some movements within the theological tradition call for justice but diminish or reject the authority of doctrinal revelation. Justice is interpreted almost exclusively sociologically, politically or ideologically, apart from the character of God revealed in Scripture (which informs our understanding of justice). On the conservative side, doctrinal correctness is often treated as an end, and the church's responsibility for structural justice is downplayed or neglected altogether. Calvin's biblicism provides an essential corrective to both errors. Because Calvin grounds both doctrine and ethics in the revealed nature of the Triune God, his approach mandates public witness as a necessary component of faithfulness in Christian theology. Justice is not a negotiable political issue, but a revealed theological reality that flows from knowing and worshiping the triune God as he is in Scripture (Boesak 2017:38).

This makes Calvin's biblicism a basis for an integrated public theology, one that concedes no fracture between doctrine and practice and understands the Trinitarian doctrine itself to be the constitutive character of the church's ethical imagination. The God who lives eternally in relational love and justice sends His people forth to reflect that same relational justice in the world. For Calvin, any retrieval of the past that stops at mere intellectual recovery rather than ethical reformation will fall short. The witness of the church (both in word and deed) must flow from its confession of the triune God, whose acts in

redemptive history repeatedly define the church's describing of justice, mercy, and faithfulness in society.

Calvin's emphasis on a shared identity is in keeping with much of African theology that tends to lend itself to relational ontology. As shown in African theologians like Mbiti (1990:106) and Bediako (1992:210), African worldviews are inherently corporate and social in nature, being consistent with the perichoretic communal nature of the Trinity, where Father, Son, and Spirit, manifest eternal communion together. Such a Trinitarian foundation gives theological justification to engage the puzzles of justice, reconciliation, and corporate restoration in African communities. Given that the concept of community is of immense significance of African societies (Boaheng 2021:78), it is vital to explore the specific context of African societies, it is worth considering the implications of the Trinity for public witness. As such, the doctrine of the Trinity, where diversity is tempered with unity, offers a powerful theological lens through which to formulate communitarian networks in Africa (Boaheng 2021:78). This Trinitarian conception pushes against individualisms that break down community and the valuing of difference as strength. Numerous African theologians now see the necessity for the church to speak to the social and political issues on the continent (Eze 1997). This entails moving away from an individualistic notion of faith toward a more communal, socially engaged understanding. The call to public witness, which is based on a Trinitarian model of God needs to be applied in a context that addresses the realities of African societies. It is thus not surprising that African theological education has historically failed to respond adequately to the pressing challenges facing the African masses — poverty, oppression, etc. (Amanze 2009). A pertinent public theology must intentionally address these struggles and concretely assess its theological merits regarding justice and liberation (Golo 2018). Mutua (2011) proposes a holistic transitional justice perspective for Africa focusing on "community wholesomeness" as a pathway towards societal healing and balance. The ideal of Ubuntu, which prioritises interconnectedness and communal well-being, offers an important ethical framework for this engagement. Cherishing a communal worldview as articulated in the Trinity and the Ubuntu principle among Christians will bring about the formation of peaceful societies comprising individuals who are dissimilar yet capable of co-existing, thereby combatting the issues of ethnocentrism and tribalism that have long afflicted the continent. The Ubuntu

philosophy was founded to combat the apartheid regime in South Africa (Msugther et al. 2023). Moreover, through postcolonial articulations of the Triune God not as a colonising doctrine, but as a decolonising doctrine (Verhoef 2021), African theologians can equip the church to return to its roots as a force for good, seeking justice for the oppressed and affected by injustices faced by the city.

Conclusion

Retrieving Calvin's biblicism is not just an academic enterprise of systematic theologians—it is a summons to theological reformation for the whole church. The schism between exegesis, doctrine, and public witness is a disaster not of temporary inconvenience but one that undermines the very coherence of the church's faith, worship, and mission. When exegesis shrinks into historical reconstruction, doctrine is speculative theory, and public theology drifts untethered from God's self-revelation, then the church loses its theological centre of gravity.

The way forward is provided in Calvin's biblicism. This is because Calvin posits that doctrine flows organically from Scripture, and that Scripture itself tells the story of the Triune God's economy of salvation. He provides the church with a unified theological epistemology; one in which exegesis, doctrine, worship, and justice are part of a single theological task. This integrative approach invites biblical scholars to read alongside the church, systematic theologians to think alongside biblical text, pastors to preach alongside theological depth, and the entire body of Christ to worship alongside theological precision.

But in the end Calvin's biblicism confronts the church to recover her Trinitarian identity — a people baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt 28:19), a people called to bear witness in the world of the Triune God's justice and mercy. In the fragmented and polarised age, in which theology often pendulates between rootless activism on the one side and barren dogmatism on the other, Calvin's biblicism provides the church a means to think deeply, worship faithfully, and act justly all from the coherent centre of the Triune God's self-revelation in Scripture. More so, Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism offers a way to research justice, reconciliation, and public witness within African societies where communal identity and social responsibility are vitally

important. The analytical hermeneutics employed by the doctrine of the Trinity makes it clear that ethnically and politically divided societies require similar social cohesion. Focusing on relationality and mutual responsibility, Calvin's theological vision contributes to African ethical traditions that emphasise the good of the community and the need for justice on behalf of the marginalised.

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