

The Bible and the Trinity: Trinitarian Reasoning among 19th Century Northern Baptists

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Challenges toward Trinitarianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are well known. The continual attack on classical conceptions by the Socinians and the Unitarians led to what historian Philip Dixon called a “fading of the Trinitarian imagination.” By this he meant that the Trinity moves from being “celebrated as the centre of faith and life and starts to be defended as something to be accepted.”² A major development in subsequent Trinitarian debates was the theology of F. D. E. Schleiermacher, who argued for the importance of the Trinity, but only in relation to the experience of salvation.³ He then placed the doctrine at the end of his theology, not because he thought it an afterthought, but because it was the capstone of theological reflection on religious experience.⁴ In America, Trinitarian battles raged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the Unitarian threat grew.⁵ But Baptists were mostly absent the early key Trinitarian battles in America, largely due to their position outside the mainstream and their pre-occupation with other theological issues (mostly revolving around Calvinism, revivalism, and their own Baptist distinctives).⁶ This absence makes it difficult to know how American Baptists thought about the Trinity during this time.⁷

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² Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 212. William Placher makes a similar argument about both Protestants and Roman Catholics: “In both cases a marginalization of the Trinity went hand in hand with greater optimism about the use of human reason to move toward God, and greater optimism about the capacity of human efforts to cooperate in accomplishing our salvation” (William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 172).

³ Samuel M. Powell, “Nineteenth-Century Protestant Doctrines of the Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. by Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 267–280; and Fred Sanders, “The Trinity,” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. by Kelly M. Kopic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 31–33.

⁴ On the Trinity in Schleiermacher, see Terrence Tice, *Schleiermacher, Abingdon Pillars of Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 42–43, 74–75.

⁵ On the Unitarian/Congregationalist debates, see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1–57; Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 284–7; and E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 197–217.

⁶ Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapters 2 and 3.

⁷ Curtis Freeman, “God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33 (Fall 2006): 323–344, gives some exception to this, though it still largely holds true. See also Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 70–79. For a perspective on British Baptists in the eighteenth century, see Michael A. G. Haykin, “Andrew Fuller and the Fading of the Trinitarian Imagination,” in *A New*

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, American Baptists began to publish theological treatises (including systematic theologies) in large numbers. This paper proposes to look at Baptist theologians in the northern United States (because those in the South were functioning out of a different theological tradition) from about 1865 to 1910, surveying their Trinitarian reasoning. By the end of the 1860s northern Baptists boasted five seminaries and their professors were the ones writing the theological textbooks. Thus, the seminary professors and their theologies provide a good window into the status of the northern Baptist “Trinitarian imagination.”

Most Baptist historians suppose that prior to the rise of the liberal “New Theology” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that American Baptists largely held to what Timothy George has referred to as an “orthodox Baptist consensus.”⁸ This paper will look at how many who fit within this so-called consensus approached Trinitarianism. Several questions can be asked: Were they influenced by the change of the doctrine by Schleiermacher, the challenge of Unitarianism, by any confessional tradition, or perhaps by something else? In what sense could their doctrines of Trinity be considered orthodox? And what do the answers to such questions say about the notion of a northern Baptist orthodox consensus?

The northern Baptist theologians were not bound by any confessional tradition, but instead approached the Trinity through the lens of their views of the Bible and their larger theological method. The result was a Trinitarian reasoning that was biblicist in theological reasoning and highly resistant to metaphysical speculation. They regularly rejected (sometimes in part and sometimes in the whole) the historic Trinitarian formulations of the early church creeds and councils. In the end, their Trinitarian theologies were significantly stripped down to only include explicit Biblical assertions and often rejected “philosophical” notions such as eternal generation. Some show a fading of the importance of Trinitarianism, and some show a significant re-imagination of the doctrine. The nineteenth century “orthodox” Baptist consensus, at least among Northern Baptists, also included not only a fading but also a re-imagination as well as an eclipse of the Trinitarian imagination.

These Baptist theologians were not consciously working within any given tradition—in fact, they consciously rejected such a notion⁹—and so their theologies have a variety of starting

Divinity: Transatlantic Reformed Evangelical Debates during the Long Eighteenth Century, ed. by Mark Jones and Michael A. G. Haykin (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2018), 193–203.

⁸ Timothy George, “The Future of Baptist Theology,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, rev. ed., ed. by Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2001), 1–10. “Thus despite countless splits and some doctrinal defections (e.g., the lapse of certain Baptists into universalism), there emerged among Baptists in the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century America what might be called an orthodox Baptist consensus, represented in the North by Augustus H. Strong, in the South by E. Y. Mullins” (3).

⁹ This is beyond the purpose of this paper, but these nineteenth-century northern Baptist seminaries had no confessions of faith. And, the first seminary, Newton, who consciously modeled themselves after Andover Theological Seminary, purposefully declined inclusion of a confession because they did not want that constraint. See William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 281; Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *A School of the Church: Andover Newton across Two Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 29–35; William H. Brackney, *Congregation and Campus: Baptists in Higher Education* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 293–94; Matthew C. Shrader, *Thoughtful Christianity:*

points and provide a variety of Trinitarian explanations. But despite the variety, there is some similarity. The various theologians fit two general approaches to the Trinity, (1) those who saw the Trinity as a simple biblical truth needing some explanation and (2) those who saw the Trinity as foundational to an overall conception of God and Christianity. The final section will draw several conclusions about how these Baptists approached the Bible and the Trinity.

A Biblical Trinity: Trinity as Fact of Biblical Data

It is helpful to get a sense of who fits this broad category. Alvah Hovey (1820–1903),¹⁰ who taught at the Newton Theological Institute in the Boston area from 1849–1903, fits here, as does his one-time student, George Dana Boardman Pepper (1833–1913),¹¹ who taught at Crozer Theological Seminary in eastern Pennsylvania from 1867–1882. Ezekiel Gilman Robinson (1815–1894),¹² professor at Rochester Theological Seminary from 1853–1872, also fits this category, as does one of his former students, Elias Henry Johnson (1841–1906),¹³ who followed Pepper at Crozer from 1883–1906. Robinson’s successor at Rochester, Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836–1921),¹⁴ who was at Rochester from 1872–1912 also broadly fits this category, but—in typical Strong fashion—he charted his own path.

For these theologians the Trinity was simply a biblical fact. It was a key doctrine inherited from the history of the church, and so it had to find its way into one’s theology. The basic Trinitarian axiom that God is fundamentally one (as the Old Testament shows) while also three (as the New Testament shows) was the starting point for all these theologians. Robinson stated this clearly: “the numerical Unity of God must at the outset be regarded as one of the most clearly established of biblical truths. Numerically, and in essence, God must be regarded as absolutely one; but if Christ and the Spirit be Divine, then, in the mode of his existence, God must be hypostatically or personally triune.”¹⁵ Trinitarianism was “not a metaphysical statement,”¹⁶ as Strong said, but only the resultant idea of several biblical facts.

Alvah Hovey and the Problem of Authority within the Context of Nineteenth-Century Northern Baptists, Monographs in Baptist History (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 29–31.

¹⁰ Hovey wrote a multi-edition systematic theology under the following titles: Alvah Hovey, *Outlines of Christian Theology* (Providence: Providence Press Company, 1870); Alvah Hovey, *Manual of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1877); Alvah Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology* (New York: Silver, Burdett, 1900). He also published an individual essay on the Trinity: “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Baptist Doctrines: Being an Exposition, in a Series of Essays by Representative Baptist Ministers, of the Distinctive Points of Baptist Faith and Practice*, ed. by Charles A. Jenkins (St. Louis: Chancy R. Barns, 1880), 361–384.

¹¹ Pepper’s theology textbook was titled: *Outlines of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rodgers Co., 1873).

¹² Robinson’s theology textbook was titled: *Christian Theology* (Rochester, N.Y.: Press of E. R. Andrews, 1894).

¹³ Johnson’s theology textbook was titled: *Outline of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1891).

¹⁴ Strong’s theology textbook was titled: *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907).

¹⁵ Robinson, *Christian Theology*, 235.

¹⁶ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 304.

While the basic idea of God's unity and threeness was easily understood as a biblical fact, it was not always clear what place it should occupy in one's theology. What is most common is that a few comments on the Trinity were inserted at various points in their systematic theologies, perhaps when one discussed the perfections of God,¹⁷ when one discussed salvation and the deity of Christ or the deity of the Holy Spirit, or when one discussed how the human and divine natures of Christ must be affirmed at the same time. Where to give a formal presentation of the whole doctrine, however, was more difficult. Robinson, Johnson, and Pepper have formal discussions of the Trinity in their doctrines of salvation, after discussing the deity of Christ. In distinction, Strong gives a fifty-page formal presentation of the Trinity in his major section discussing the nature of God.¹⁸ Hovey, for his part, had no formal presentation of the full doctrine within his systematic theology, but he did publish a separate essay where he addressed the subject.¹⁹ For these theologians the doctrine was somewhat ancillary in their systems. It was a fact to acknowledge, one that surfaced at several points, but not a driving idea of their overall theology. Even for Strong, who included the doctrine as a fundamental about God that had implications on other doctrines, the Trinity was not as important as another of his ideas on the nature of God, that being ethical monism.²⁰

Whether in formal presentations or in their ancillary comments on the Trinity, the issue of what "persons" meant and entailed was a turning point. These theologians all recognized that within Trinitarian discussions, the word "person" has its own unique definition that is different from common usage. Hovey, Pepper, and Johnson understood person to be fundamentally a reference to consciousness.²¹ Robinson, also recognizing the difficulty of defining the word, argued that one would have to move from the economic presentation of the Trinity in salvation back to the immanent reality of God, but this was inscrutable. Add to this the complexity of various historical definitions of the words and there is great "difficulty of any clear statement of the doctrine."²² Nevertheless, there are some biblical clues toward this end, and at least a feeble effort could be made. Robinson attempted it this way: "In the Godhead, then, we must infer that there were from eternity hypostatical distinctions which made it fit and necessary that, in the economy of redemption, one of these should be Father, another Son, and another Paraclete or Holy Spirit. But what these distinctions were, what their *modus existendi*, and what their common relation to the absolute oneness of the Divine essence, the Scriptures do not inform us,

¹⁷ What was typical was to include God's tri-personality as an attribute. Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology*, 110–111; and Pepper, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 57–58.

¹⁸ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 305–52.

¹⁹ Hovey, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity."

²⁰ Strong's ethical monism, by his own admission, was the center-point of his theology. For his clearest presentations of the ideas, see: Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 105, and also Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1899). The most helpful discussions of the idea are Carl F. H. Henry, *Personal Idealism and Strong's Theology* (Wheaton, Ill: Van Kampen Press, 1951) and John Aloisi, *Augustus Hopkins Strong and the Struggle to Reconcile Christian Theology with Modern Thought* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2021).

²¹ Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology*, 110; Pepper, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 57–58.

²² Robinson, *Christian Theology*, 239.

and it is idle to inquire.”²³ In the end, while these theologians recognized that the meaning of person was incredibly difficult and was not one-hundred-percent equal to what is normally meant in modern parlance, it certainly included the modern notion of consciousness, though on a higher plane than human consciousness.

This had important consequences for how a few of these theologians looked at the will of God and the will of the persons of the Trinity. Hovey and Strong both asserted that the will was tied to person and not nature. Thus, when discussing the hypostatic union, both Hovey and Strong explicitly reject the idea that Christ had both a human and divine will; consequently, they accept the Monothelite notion that Christ’s person has only one will.²⁴ The result for their trinitarianism is that each person has a will, and thus there are three wills in the Trinity. Hovey states clearly how this understanding of person and will interact: “Here, then, we are taught that the Father, Son, and Spirit do have personal distinctions,—three faculties of will, three faculties of knowing, three sets of affections; or, in a word, three personal centres, three consciousnesses. Objectively, and in respect to the universe, their knowledge, will, conscience, and affection are one in comprehension and aim; subjectively, each is personally, though not in substance, distinguishable from the others.”²⁵ This quote has the implication that even if there is an apparent unity in God’s will there is subordination of wills within the Trinity, an idea that Hovey makes explicit elsewhere.²⁶

It is becoming clear that these theologians felt freedom to improvise on the classical conceptions of the Trinity. As we have seen, Hovey and Strong explicitly affirmed Monothelitism. Johnson did not go that far, but he saw the inherent dilemma in the discussion. He rejected the Chalcedonian solution and the Monothelite option and created his own definition of the hypostatic union that argues for some kind of unique union of natures, seemingly ignoring the Chalcedonian claim that the natures of Christ are without mixture or confusion.²⁷ Hovey, Robinson, Strong, and Johnson all explicitly rejected eternal generation as a modern absurdity (Johnson went so far as to say that eternal generation and procession are neoplatonic ideas).²⁸ Contrary to these, Pepper accepted eternal generation as somehow true, though it is cloudy: “That there is a certain subordination of the Eternal Son to the Eternal Father seems to

²³ Robinson, *Christian Theology*, 251.

²⁴ Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology*, 228; Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 684.

²⁵ Hovey, *Manual of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics*, 240.

²⁶ “The language of Christ appears, no doubt, to give a certain precedence to the will of the Father; but it is not easy for us to define that precedence, or to determine how much his discussion of the matter was influenced by the state of mind which he saw in his hearers. One thing is certain: He acknowledged the deity of the Father; and, if he was to win their confidence at all, it must be by showing them, not that he was personally the Father, but that he recognized and honored the Father, and was one with him in word and deed” (Hovey, *Manual of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics*, 180). “That the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, as understood by evangelical Christians, is not inconsistent with some kind of subordination on the part of the Son to the Father” (Hovey, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” 381–82).

²⁷ Johnson, *Outline of Systematic Theology*, 173–76

²⁸ Johnson, *Outline of Systematic Theology*, 197.

be implied in the terms and in the relation of the two in the economy of redemption.”²⁹ Robinson’s statement is a fair summary of the overall position toward classical conceptions: “[Creedal and confession documents] are valuable as indices, but worthless as authorities to him whose care is to know, not what a given people may have accepted as true, but what the Scriptures teach. The dogmatic treatises of individual authors may be of service, and should have weight with us, just in proportion to their manifest qualifications for trustworthy judgments of the meaning of Scripture. The selection of any one or more of these, or any given age or sect, or the adoption of any particular creed or confession as ultimate authority in theology, is simply postposterous and an offence against the authority of the word of God.”³⁰

In summary, this group of theologians all saw the Trinity as a biblical fact. God is clearly one and also three in some sense. How God is three was the most difficult piece to understand. The majority opinion was that it means something like three consciousnesses, which meant multiple wills within the Trinity. Classic definitions and positions were easily dismissed and left behind in favor of modern definitions and somewhat novel positions. What is most important to remember is that these saw the basic biblical facts of the Trinity to be essential: God is one and three. How this was true was fundamentally inscrutable and beyond the biblical data. That did not mean they could not or would not attempt to explain these points. *It meant they had freedom in their attempts to do so.* The discussions, councils, and creeds of church history merely provided suggestions or “indices” of previous viewpoints, which to their nineteenth-century minds seemed farfetched. Most northern Baptist theologians believed that the Trinity was a simple biblical truth with a wide variety of potential explanations. But not all fit here, there were others who saw the Trinity as a more direct window into the fundamental nature of God and Christianity.

A Foundational Trinity: God as Absolute Personality

There are two theologians who fit under this category. Ebenezer Dodge (1819–1890)³¹ taught theology at Hamilton Theological Seminary in central New York from 1861–1890. The other theologian who fits this category was Dodge’s most famous student, William Newton Clarke (1841–1912),³² who succeeded Dodge as professor of theology at Hamilton from 1890–1910.

Dodge and Clarke agree with the previous group of theologians in several general areas. They agree that the basic idea of the Trinity is built on the biblical facts that there is one God (as clearly asserted in the Old Testament) and also three persons (as the incarnation and Pentecost in

²⁹ Pepper, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 131.

³⁰ Robinson, *Christian Theology*, 16

³¹ Dodge’s theology was published in two editions: Ebenezer Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology: Printed for the Students of Hamilton Theological Seminary* (Hamilton, N.Y.: E. D. Van Slyck, 1875); Ebenezer Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology* (Hamilton, N.Y.: University Press Print, 1883). He also has written Ebenezer Dodge, *Evidences of Christianity: With an Introduction on the Existence of God and the Immortality of the Soul* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1869), which has a few statements on the Trinity.

³² Clarke’s theology was published as: William Newton Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899).

the New Testament show).³³ They agree that the most immediate knowledge of the Trinity is found in the economic Trinity, which then reveals something of the immanent.³⁴ Agreeing with the previous theologians, these would also agree that the immanent Trinity is beyond the reach of human understanding. The same difficulty applies to discussions of “persons.”

But there are key differences between the former group and this one. Both Dodge and Clarke discussed their doctrine of the Trinity within their discussions on the character of God. Of the theologians in the previous group, only Strong made this move, but Dodge and Clarke had a particular reason to place it here. The Trinity was much more than a biblical fact that could be pieced together from biblical data. Trinity highlighted a fundamental truth about God that had extensive ramifications. The threeness of God’s personality had to do with his completeness and perfect personality. More specifically, Trinity is the perfect life. As Dodge wrote: “tri-personality represents the divine life in its absolute fulness.”³⁵ This is a fundamental look into who God is and how he interacts with the world. It is revelation of God’s absolute consciousness. The Trinity is how God lives in perfect and complete personality. Dodge again said: “The Trinity denotes the tripersonality of God. It thus indicates the triune character of his absolute consciousness. God thus exists as one in three and three in one. He is one in the sense in which He is not three, and three in the sense in which He is not one. The oneness pertains to his nature, and the threeness to his personality. This triunity is another name for the living God.”³⁶

For both Dodge and Clarke, God is different because of his tri-personality. How the three persons interact is the demonstration of God’s perfect life. The persons of the Trinity work together to *make up* God’s absolute consciousness. Each person brings something different to this equation. Dodge again explained: “The Father knows himself in the Son, and realizes himself in the Spirit. This is the eternal, finished, but abiding process in the absolute life of God. God in eternity comes to the consciousness of himself, through the Son, in the Spirit. The absolute personality of God reveals itself in these essential forms. These forms are, again, so many centers of activity.”³⁷ Clarke states something similar that God is the sum of his three modes of activity. “There appears to be reason to hold that there are natural elements in God’s self-consciousness,

³³ Clarke further argued that the place of the Spirit in the Trinity is a doctrine that was mostly determined after the New Testament (again, it is built through reflection, not revelation). This is still ongoing: “If we ask when the progress ended, so that the doctrine of the Triunity [i.e., immanent Trinity] was finished and complete, the answer is that it has never ended, and the doctrine is not yet finished and complete. The Spirit of truth is still guiding the Church into the truth, and genuine progress in apprehension of truth respecting Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be expected yet. Failure to recognize this great fact tends to impoverish both theology and religion.” (Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 169–70).

³⁴ Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 169–170; Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology* (1875), 87; Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology* (1883), 133. Clarke uses the term Trinity to refer to the economic and the word Triunity to refer to the immanent.

³⁵ Dodge, *Evidences of Christianity*, 132.

³⁶ Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology* (1875), 85.

³⁷ Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology* (1883), 133.

composing a Triunity in him, on which are founded the three self-manifestations that *make up* the Trinity.”³⁸

For Dodge, this results in some kind of subordination, even though the persons all work together in some sense. The Father generates the Son and breathes out the Spirit and so can lay claim to what the Son and Spirit do. The Son, who also breathes out the Spirit can lay claim to what the Spirit does, but not to the Father: “There is, then, a subordination in the order of subsistence: but not in priority of being, or worth of character. For this order is a necessary and eternal one. Still each is supreme in its sphere and in the order of his life. Thus the Son is central in the movement of the divine consciousness, and the Spirit is that which completes that consciousness and so has its own priority.”³⁹ Clarke agrees with this notion and says that the “Father is the source of the Son.”⁴⁰ He takes this to mean that “Son” refers to the economic person and “Word” to the immanent person. He refuses to say they are equal terms, but they both point to the reality of eternal Sonship and eternal Fatherhood.

As previously noted, the doctrine of the Trinity showed how God was absolute personality or ultimate self-consciousness. It was a demonstration of God’s inner fulness of life, which Christians can experience in the works of salvation. William Adams Brown, a friend of Clarke’s, helpfully explained: “These ontological distinctions have lost their meaning for [Clarke]. The trinity is a truth of the Christian experience. The distinctions with which it deals concern man rather than God. They express different aspects in which God manifests himself to us as we contemplate the different phases of his redemptive activity.”⁴¹

Clarke argued that eternal generation was an old term that has outlived its usefulness but was helpful in saying the Father produced the Son, but not in time. The best idea of what this means is: “that God is in some manner forever reproducing himself within himself.”⁴² Dodge and Clarke avoided the Monothelism that Hovey and Strong held, but this was not because any council warned them against it. Neither was it because Dodge and Clarke attached will to nature, as most classical conceptions have. Rather, it was because in their trinitarian theology, if God in his Trinity was absolute personality, then there could only be one will in such an ultimate self-consciousness and ultimate personality. Dodge and Clarke—like the previous group—accepted a modern notion of person, but they—unlike the previous group—attached it to the overall being of God.

Discussing the immanent Trinity is difficult because it was a metaphysical discussion. But it was one of immense practical value. This was because the immanent Trinity, particularly the tri-personality of God, was the foundation of what God did in his economic work of salvation. God’s absolute personality, as it worked out in the missions of the three persons, provided not

³⁸ Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 177, italics added.

³⁹ Dodge, *Lectures on Christian Theology* (1883), 134.

⁴⁰ Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 172.

⁴¹ William Adams Brown, “The Theology of William Newton Clarke,” *Harvard Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (April 1910): 173.

⁴² Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 172.

only salvation, but also the example of perfection which all people innately desire. The Trinity was more than just a biblical fact, it was the basis of Christianity and all reality. This is how Dodge and Clarke were different than those of the first group. They understood “personality” and the Christian’s experience of the Trinity as the starting point of this doctrine and all doctrines.⁴³

Summation: The Bible and the Trinity

The fading of the Trinitarian imagination that Dixon elaborated on extended well beyond the seventeenth century. Curtis Freeman has chronicled how Baptists in the nineteenth century followed this path and thus Trinitarianism became more obscure and less central to their Christianity (he looks at confessions of faith, hymnals, sermons, and theologies).⁴⁴ Trinitarianism was relegated to a traditional doctrine that was not contrary to reason, but it had an uncertain place in their theology. Stephen Holmes gives a longer chronicle of how there was a fundamental shift in Trinitarian theology when Schleiermacher critiqued the notions of nature and person as they are traditionally understood in Trinitarian theology. Consequently, for Schleiermacher, “the doctrine of the Trinity stands in need of re-narration.”⁴⁵ As was mentioned, he understood it as the capstone of reflection on the personal experience of salvation. Freeman argues that because Baptists had an ancillary place in their theology for Trinitarianism, they were like Schleiermacher. But Schleiermacher could still see a place for it as historical Christian experience. These Baptists had no such emphasis on experience and so struggled to find a place for the Trinity.⁴⁶

The first group of theologians presented in this paper corroborates well with Freeman’s findings. But the examples of Dodge and Clarke go beyond in their insistence on absolute personality. Holmes points to Isaak Dorner as the one who further developed the understanding of God’s nature and person when he “argued for a basic shift in theology from regarding God as absolute substance to seeing God as absolute personality.”⁴⁷ This effort to refer to God as absolute person satisfied the nineteenth-century craving for how to understand person and self-determination. But it also created problems for how to relate this personal notion of God with classical conceptions such as simplicity and immutability.⁴⁸ Holmes argues that Dorner had followed Schleiermacher also in the idea that there was a “fundamental weakness in the inherited

⁴³ C. H. Dodd, a student of Dodge’s agreed: “Even the highly metaphysical dogma of the Trinity must go through the alembic of his own witnessing contacts with its truth to be satisfying as a doctrinal statement” (Charles H. Dodd, “Ebenezer Dodge: Pioneer in Experimental Theology,” *Crozer Quarterly* 2 (1925): 283).

⁴⁴ Freeman, “God in Three Persons,” 340–44.

⁴⁵ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 190.

⁴⁶ Freeman, “God in Three Persons,” 341.

⁴⁷ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 192.

⁴⁸ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 192.

doctrine of God which then needed correcting.”⁴⁹ Dodge and Clarke followed the path worn by Schleiermacher, and especially Dorner, in their insistence in seeing God’s absolute personality or self-consciousness as the primary grounds out of which to construct a doctrine of the Trinity.

Each of the theologians surveyed offer their own unique take on the Trinity. They all felt freedom to improvise. But there is one further northern Baptist theologian that has not been surveyed yet. This is George Washington Northrup (1825–1900). Northrup learned theology from Robinson and then taught in Chicago first at the Morgan Park Theological Seminary from 1867–1892 and then the University of Chicago from 1892–1900 when the new university subsumed Morgan Park. Northrup did not leave behind a systematic theology. In fact, he published very little. One important article of his, though, shows that he was willing to undertake a much more dramatic reworking of the theology than even Dodge and Clarke were. He argued that there had been a great corruption of Christianity as it was in Jesus Christ. He argued that ecclesiastical theology was New Testament Christianity combined with Greek philosophy and Latin jurisprudence and politics. All this was a mistake.⁵⁰ Creedal Christianity and extra-biblical ideas like the Trinity all needed to be thrown out as an absurdity and false path, a “wide departure from the Christianity of Christ.”⁵¹ Northrup saw more than just the doctrine of the Trinity in need of correction, it was all of “ecclesiastical Christianity.” Northrup took doctrinal modification much further than Dodge and Clark.⁵²

There was a spectrum of theological views. Northrup represented the most radical of the theologians presented here. Dodge and Clarke, at least in their Trinitarianism, were not as radical as Northrup, but they moved much further than Hovey, Pepper, Robinson, Johnson, and Strong. Still, this shows that all the theologians of the nineteenth-century northern Baptist seminaries had modified notions of the Trinity. Each felt freedom to improvise away from traditional categories and to ignore classical discussions. Despite their difference, they show similarity in their approach to the Bible. They have simple presentations of the biblical data inserted at various points.⁵³ This biblicist reasoning was highly resistant to metaphysics. Not that

⁴⁹ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 195. Holmes further argues that it was P. T. Forsyth and Karl Barth followed Dorner in this idea, but neither recognized Dorner had followed Schleiermacher.

⁵⁰ George Washington Northrup, “The Fatherhood of God,” *American Journal of Theology* 5, no. 3 (July 1901): 473–495.

⁵¹ Northrup, “The Fatherhood of God,” 494.

⁵² The difference between Northrup’s view and Clarke’s is a possible demonstration of Kenneth Cauthen’s distinction between evangelical liberalism and modernistic liberalism: Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1983), 26–30.

⁵³ One further path that could be followed here is the specter of Moses Stuart and his biblicist method, which comports well with a rejection of classical conceptions and the freedom to improvise. Many of the theologians here explicitly reference Stuart both as a model for theological method but some do also for argumentation on the Trinity. Stuart was famous for arguing against Unitarians in defense of Trinitarianism. Not all Trinitarians appreciate his method here because he was willing to reject classical notions such as eternal generation. Certain of the Princeton theologians took issue with Stuart and exchanged their own controversial papers with Stuart. But the Baptist theologians surveyed in this paper explicitly appreciated Stuart’s Trinitarian thought. On some of the roots of Stuart’s method, see John H. Giltner, *Moses Stuart: The Father of Biblical Science in America* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1988); Carl Diehl, *Americans and German Scholarship 1770-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 74–75; Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown, CT:

they denied the presence of metaphysics, just the general helpfulness of them. One could speak of God's nature, but it was ultimately inscrutable and extra-biblical, which meant that the theologian had freedom to speculate—especially without traditional creedal constraints.⁵⁴

The claim here is that these Baptist theologians, in the end, significantly stripped down their positive Trinitarian theologies to only include explicit Biblical assertions while improvising on much of the rest of the doctrine. Some moved beyond classical conceptions to very modern notions. One theologian completely rejected even the idea of the doctrine. The most conservative position was basically a stripped down biblicism. If there was such a thing among these northern Baptists as an orthodox consensus, it allowed for not only a fading of the trinitarian imagination, but also a re-imagining and even an eclipse.

Wesleyan University Press, 1969), chapter 3; and John H. Sailhamer, "Johann August Ernesti: The Role of History in Biblical Interpretation" *JETS* 44, no. 2 (June 2001): 193–206. On Stuart, Princeton, and Trinitarianism, see Allen Stanton, "Samuel Miller's (1769–1850) Theological, Historical, Biblical, and Pastoral Defense of the Eternal Generation of the Son," *Westminster Theological Journal* 81 (2019): 141–65. On the Princetonians of the nineteenth century and the variety of their own interpretations of the Trinity, see Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), chapter 3; and Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), chapter 6.

⁵⁴ This comports with what Steven Harmon has noticed about nineteenth-century Baptist attitudes: "First, the decline in credal terminology in Baptist confessions coincides with the intellectual upheaval of the Enlightenment. Even those who did not embrace the anti-supernaturalism of the Enlightenment worldview experienced some attraction to its anti-traditionalism. That Baptist confession became less traditional in their wording during this time is hardly surprising. Second, the radical individualism of the American soil in which the Baptist tradition took root and flourished during the next two centuries had little room for ancient doctrinal norms that might limit the freedom of the individual conscience. Confessions that expressed doctrine simply by means of biblical texts and biblical terminology allowed individuals to interpret those texts according to the dictates of their consciences" (Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 81). R. Lucas Stamps makes the similar point that the move away from conciliar terminology in the confessions of faith in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made them "more ambiguous and open to heterodox interpretations" (R. Lucas Stamps, "Baptists, Classic Christology, and the Christian Tradition," in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 103).