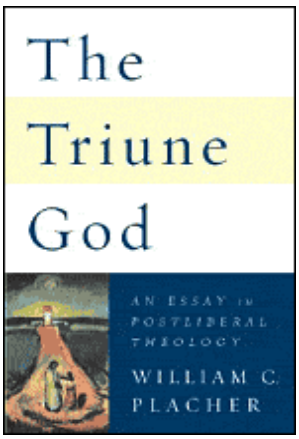


**Placher, William C.**

***The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology***

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007. Pp. x + 163. Paper. $24.95. ISBN 9780664230609.

Nick Norelli
Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
New Jersey

**1. The Unknowable God**

In this first chapter of *The Triune God* Placher takes what seems to me to be a very Eastern approach to the Trinity with an apophatic way of talking (or not talking) about God. He shares an anecdote whereby one of his students suggested that he was going to prove the existence of God while on sabbatical to which he said: *"My project, though, might better have been described as 'arguing that trying to prove the existence of God is a bad idea.'"* (1) He argues that:

> If we could prove the existence of God, moreover, then we would have this one God firmly established, and the claim that God is triune would be at most an afterthought, an added complexity to a basic belief in one God. If, however, as I believe, we can know God only as revealed in Christ through the Holy Spirit, then we start with three. (1)

Again, this is very reminiscent of the Eastern approach to the Trinity. In the East it was commonplace to begin with the three (*hypostases*) whereas in the West it was standard to begin talk about God with the one (*ousia*), although Gregory of Nazianzen's famous quote always stands in the back of my mind when (mis?)classifying Eastern Trinitarianism in this way, he said: *"No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendour of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one"* (*Orations* 40.41).

But Placher takes it a step further in arguing that proving God is akin to idolatry when he says:

> Talk of "proof" is inappropriate, for proof involves defining one's terms, and an entity so defined is inevitably an idol rather than God. Neither human reason nor human religious experience can lead us to God. (25)

Placher spends the chapter examining various philosophers (Descartes, Locke, Anselm, Aquinas, Eckhart, Kierkegaard, Levinas, and Wittgenstein) from the middles ages to modern times, both summarizing their arguments and critiquing their shortcomings, as well as clearing up some common misconceptions about them (e.g., that they tried to 'prove' God's existence). For the philosophically illiterate such as me this chapter was thoroughly readable and highly entertaining. I found myself laughing at times, like when he quotes David Tracy as saying that Kierkegaard was willing to try any approach except a system (29). I also found myself challenged, especially when he expresses his worries about Levinas' identifying God with the 'human other' and his unwillingness to consider contexts other than *ethical* for talking about God (34).

I especially appreciated his remark that:

> [P]remodern thinkers like Anselm and Aquinas, and the mystical tradition before the early modern age, were not trying to prove God's existence, define God's essence, or describe their own experiences of God. They were trying, instead, to show that such enterprises are impossible and that God lies beyond all our proofs and definitions and imaginations. (22)

But not to worry, Placher is not here arguing for agnosticism as some might think. Instead he contends that: *"Biblical texts claim to tell us more. It is God's self-revelation, and that alone, that can get us beyond fumbling, unanswered questions…"* (41).

His concluding words to this chapter are thought provoking to say the least. To loosely paraphrase, he argues that if God came to us in a way that we can describe God, that would render faith impossible. But since he came to us as a servant, in the form of a man, nothing tempts us to say that we understand God. (41-42)

**2. The Word Made Flesh**

In this chapter Placher picks up where he left off in the first and argues that God is truly known only through revelation. He says: *"with respect to God: no matter how impressive the argument, the religious experience, the tradition, you can't get there from here. Indeed, where you get, if you think you have gotten to God by your own efforts, is always an idol."* (43)

Of course Jesus is God's revelation to man and Placher's position is that *"[w]e encounter this God-become servant, however, only as mediated by the biblical texts."* (45) For Placher the New Testament is central and he argues that *"[i]f the Gospels are fundamentally misleading about his identity, then he turns out to be one of the many historical figures about whom we just do not know very much."* (47) But the heart of

what we want to discover in discussing the Trinity is the way in which the three persons relate to one another. He says:

> From a Christian perspective, part of the problem is that a person's relation to God (not how they understand their relation, but the relation itself) is something about which historians' research can in principle tell us nothing. (47)

So in response to this Placher *"propose[s] that the four canonical Gospels (the ones in the New Testament) are history-like witnesses to truths both historical and transcendent."* (48) What follows is a brief examination of the Gospels and summaries of the main points of commonality that they share concerning who Jesus was.

Placher makes a very good case for the irrelevancy of inerrancy in discerning who Jesus was from the Biblical texts suggesting that every detail needn't be precise because while there are discrepancies here and there in the exact details, they all portray the same *type* of person. Nothing about Jesus' person or character is fundamentally different in any of the Gospels. In criticism of the approach used by the Jesus Seminar he says:

> An approach like that of the Jesus Seminar builds its picture of Jesus' identity out of *some* stories established as particularly certain on historical grounds and ignores the characteristics of Jesus manifested in a wider range of stories that show patterns of his behavior but are individually less historically reliable. That flies in the face of common sense. [...] An emphasis on general characteristics does not dodge the question of truth. A character portrait of Adolf Hitler that makes him out to be a nice guy is false–even if every report within it of kindness to dogs and small children is true. So the Gospels would be false, not if some of their details were inaccurate, but if they did not convey the person Jesus was. (56-57)

He briefly addresses the canon of Scripture and its reliability as our best portrait of Jesus while arguing that the non-canonical Christian apocryphal literature dates too late and tells us nothing new about Jesus even where certain sayings or descriptions are thought to be accurate. A mini-Christology is presented with brief attention being paid to the titles: Lord, Son of God, Son of Man, and Christ. Drawing from the works of Larry Hurtado and Richard Bauckham, Placher notes the significance of prayer and devotion to Jesus in Paul's letters which reflect already existing praxis of the early Christian community. (72-75)

To my great dismay and this is probably going to be my biggest criticism of this work, Placher contends that the Father and the Son were actually separated while Jesus was on the cross. No doubt he assumes the penal payment theory of atonement in these comments which I find most unfortunate, but he argues his point in a way I hadn't previously encountered. Placher says:

> God's own Child is the Godforsaken One. How can this be, if God is love? The logic of the Gospel narratives is that this is not only possible, but it is the particular moment that we *most* see God as loving. Christ comes to be in solidarity with us in our separation from God, in an act of the triune God in which the Son goes off willingly even as the Father mourns. How can this *not* be, if God is love? (77)

My major problem with this assertion is that God forsaking his Son doesn't show forth the Father's love for us or his Son, nor the Son's love for us or his Father. Indeed, Christ suffering for us and giving his life for us paints this picture (Jo. 15:13), but the jump to Godforsaken-ness is unnecessary and forced.

But Placher redeems himself and forces me to continue in my love for this book when he says:

> If we ask what Jesus' story tells us in particular about the first person of the Trinity, it comes to this: this one whom Jesus calls "Father," even as he invites us to do the same, with the meaning of "Father" that we glimpse only in the relation between this one and the Word made flesh in Jesus. Since the Son is the self-revelation of the Father, all that we can say uniquely about the Father is that the Father is the Father of the Son. (80)

**3. The Epistemology of the Spirit**

In books on the Trinity it is quite common to go through the motions in showing the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit but such is not the case here. In this chapter Placher addresses the Spirit as the one that enables our belief in God. Indeed, it is the Spirit who is the foundation of anything that we may know about the Trinity. We don't find the truth of the Trinity by meditating on God's natural revelation, and it is not an idea that finds its origin in the human psyche. Placher says:

> Since God's self-revelation is *self*-revelation, moreover, the triune character of the way the one God is revealed to us, and even more specifically the way in which the Word reveals and the Spirit enables our belief in that revelation, mirror the truth about how God is, though the truth they mirror is beyond our imagining [...] But Just as human efforts to understand God necessarily fall short apart from Christ, so human efforts cannot manage to believe in Christ apart from the Holy Spirit [...] In either case, neither careful observation nor historical research can establish Jesus' divinity. It is the Holy Spirit that brings Christ within us… (84)

A quick look is taken at the word 'spirit' in scripture and the parallels with 'wind' and 'breath' — nothing really innovative or earth shattering there. But one would be hard-pressed not to agree with Pilcher's view that *"[a]s with the work of the Spirit in the period of the judges, the Spirit serves community. Paul emphasizes that community is the*

*goal of all spiritual gifts."* (90) I think this is perhaps the most under-appreciated aspect of pneumatology yet the aspect that should be appreciated most.

And as a Charismatic-Pentecostal I was pleased to read the following:

> The unknown tongues spoken by first century Christians, and by charismatic and Pentecostal Christians today, speak of and to God in a way beyond human capacity or comprehension. For Paul the Spirit shapes every stage of our lives as Christians. (90)

What follows are brief summaries of John Calvin's, Jonathan Edwards', and Karl Barth's views of the Spirit. Placher believes that *"the Reformed tradition, which can be a bit thin on other aspects of Trinitarian theology, has a particularly rich contribution to make when it comes to the Holy Spirit…"* (92) For Calvin he focused on faith as the principle work of the Spirit. I have to admit that I wasn't particularly wowed with this section. But the section on Edwards was a treat to say the least. Of Edwards he says:

> He did not focus on individual "mystical experiences," but on a *way* of experiencing *anything* in the world. And he was convinced that those who concentrated on the character of their own experience were not really subject to the work of the Spirit, which would manifest itself in focusing attention on God. (99)

As a Charismatic-Pentecostal these words gave pause for both deep introspection and retrospection of past experiences in my home church setting.

I enjoyed the section on Barth but my woeful ignorance concerning Barth and his theology prohibits me from making any concrete judgments on how well Barth has been represented. One statement that I found thought-provoking was that:

> Barth maintained that Jesus' resurrection, the coming of the Spirit, and the Parousia, Christ's return, are "three forms of one event." They are separated in time but one in God's eternity. Between the times of Jesus' earthly life and the end of all things in God, the Spirit functions principally to form the community of Christ. (110)

I believe I understand what Placher is here describing as Barth's thought, but I find it hard to wrap my head around the idea of temporal events taking place in "God's eternity." And with what I've heard about Barth and his use of modalistic language (although he vehemently denied any form of modalism from my understanding) this idea seems somewhat economically modalistic (if such a thing is possible). I will certainly endeavor to get better aquianted with Barth so I can better evaluate this idea. If I gained nothing else from this chapter, at least I gained more curiosity of Barth's Trinitarianism.

This chapter closes with some brief remarks on the filioque that left me feeling vindicated in my rejection of the clause. Placher noted that Greek Catholics (those who practice

Eastern rites yet recognize the authority of the Pope) do not recite the filioque when reciting the N-C Creed. Protestants have also by and large dropped it from their confession. He is quite right to note however that *"the theologians of the early church simply did not think in any technical way about the procession of the Spirit."* (116)

What I enjoyed most about this chapter is the interconnectedness that the Spirit enjoyed with the Father and the Son. Many works on the Trinity seek to treat all three persons in isolation from the others in the respective chapters that focus on them, but I feel that this can be a huge mistake. If we know all three in relation to one another then it only seems right that while one takes emphasis the other two are always present in our examination of them. I believe that Placher has accomplished this here.

**4. These Three Are One**

In this, the final chapter, Placher continues his apophatic approach to discussing the Trinity. He notes that after re-reading classical Trinitarian texts in light of the distinction between Aquinas' *significatum* (signification; i.e., what something is) and *modus significandi* (the mode of the thing signified; i.e., the way that something is what it is) he realized that *"[t]he key terms were not intended as definitions, but rather served as placeholders in arguments designed to preserve mystery rather than explain it."* (120) He goes on to say that *"the task of any doctrine of the Trinity is thus not to show how an abstract one is three, but to show that these three are one, and this is not an unnecessary complication but something essential to what Christians believe."* (120)

From this he argues something that I've never really considered and that is that in the fourth century when the Arians argued that Jesus was not fully God, they were *"taking the first step into polytheism."* (121) I can certainly see the thrust of this argument because early Christian praxis reflected devotion to Christ in a way previously reserved for God alone. To make Jesus a lesser god was to make him another object of worship, which aside from polytheism is also idolatry. Speaking of idolatry, Placher takes note that:

> According to the Cappadocians, the Arians' neat syllogism (God is ingenerate; the Son is generate; therefore the Son is not God) broke down in the face of the divine mystery: one cannot define God as "ingenerate" or anything else. The purpose of terms like *ousia* and *hypostasis* was to preserve the mystery, not to get rid of it. (125)

Remember, Placher argued *"that an entity so defined is inevitably an idol rather than God."* (25) Any God that we can wrap our heads around must be smaller than us and this is certainly not the Triune God.

Placher takes some time to discuss the various problems of language used to describe the being and persons of God between the East and the West, a problem that caused accusations of tri-theism and modalism. But he still maintains that each side wasn't attempting to define God but was rather attempting to define what we could not say about

God. He says: *"[i]in the classic forms of both Greek and Latin theology, the key terms resist clear meaning in order to preserve God's mystery."* (129)

He quotes R.P.C. Hanson as saying: *"There has never been a single formula adopted by the majority of Christians designed to express the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Cappadocians never imagined that there could be one."* (128) To which he added:

> Like Augustine on the Latin side, they used terms to talk about the Trinity while remaining very clear that, given the mystery of God, they did not and could not know what those terms meant. Rather, they were using them as placeholders in propositions whose real function was to establish rules concerning what could not be said about the triune God. (128)

What follows is a brief section in the social and psychological analogies for the Trinity. He admits that neither is perfect and that they end up deconstructing each other, but he sees them as almost a necessary evil so to speak. It has long been my opinion that analogies do more harm than good and when discussing the Trinity we should try to avoid them as much as is possible.

Placher then asks:

> So why try to talk about the Trinity at all? . . . it is hard to answer that question if we begin with one God and ask why we should think of God as three. But that is not the logic of Trinitarian thought. Rather, Christians begin with three, and the doctrine of the Trinity is an explanation of their oneness. (136)

He goes on to note that there is no articulated doctrine of the Trinity in Scripture but there are many Trinitarian patterns in things such as the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, Paul's benediction at the end of 2Corinthians, and in Paul's treatise on variety and oneness in 1Corinthians 12:4-6. He also contends that because each of these passages begins with a different person of the Trinity that it *"does at least indicate a lack of a necessary hierarchical order among the three."* (137)

Placher points out the risk of subordinationism when one begins with the Father as the foundation of the Trinity but counters such arguments by *"thinking through the implications of Cappadocian personalism"* (141). He says:

> It will not do to say that Son and Spirit are who they are because of the Father, while the Father, as cause of the whole Trinity, has an independent identity. That would make the Father not a person, and thereby defeat the whole argument. Instead, we have to say–as the Eastern tradition at its best does say–that the three mutually define one another's identities, so that none would have a particular identity without the others. (141)

I think that this is certainly the proper way to view the Trinity. In his conclusion Placher makes an observation concerning the persons of the Trinity that we all would do well to remember, especially those of us who fancy ourselves apologists and discuss the Trinity with those who oppose it. He said:

> For the theology of the Trinity, human persons do not finally define "personhood," with the divine persons a vaguely analogous case. Rather, it is the divine three that manifest what personhood truly is. We human persons are always failing to be fully personal. As persons, we are shaped by our relations with other persons. Yet we always deliberately raise barriers or cannot figure out how to overcome the barriers we confront. (149-50)

This statement is as profound as it is obvious, yet its obviousness is obscured by the self-centeredness of man that likes to begin with himself and reason back to God. I believe that Placher has succeeded in putting God into proper perspective in this writing. I also have to say that I appreciate Placher's sympathies for the Eastern approach to Trinitarianism as I have found myself leaning that way in recent years as well. I have definitely come away from this book with an even deeper appreciation of apophatic theology.

What we have in *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* is an extremely well-written, thought-provoking, and thoughtful treatment of Trinitarian theology. There are parts of this book that can be overwhelming for those of us who are not that well versed in philosophy but it's never so intimidating that we'd feel the need to retreat from it. Although there were detailed footnotes I would have liked to have seen a bibliography in the back of the book and a Scripture index would have been nice as well. But these small criticisms aside I have to give this book the highest recommendation; it accomplishes in 158 pages what some books triple its length fail to do; get folks excited about Trinitarian theology.