

## A review of “On Trinitarian Theological Method” by Matthew Y. Emerson and Luke Stamps

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In a book on Trinitarian theology, theologians Matthew Y. Emerson and Luke Stamps wrote a chapter arguing for their position of Ressourcement Classical Theism, over and against what they would see as revisionist attempts at Trinitarian theology.<sup>1</sup> According to Emerson and Stamps, the main issue with regards to Trinitarian theology is that of “theological method,” where, in their words, “departures from classical Christian doctrine are largely a function of theological method.”<sup>2</sup> In their essay therefore, Emerson and Stamps argue for a certain theological method, and utilize it to critique their opponent’s view of the Trinity as being biblically and theologically errant.

### **Emerson’s and Stamp’s proposal**

Evangelicals are committed to Scripture as the sole and final authority. However, does this guarantee fidelity to biblical truth? Emerson and Stamps argue that it does not. Pointing to examples of what they see as departures from “classic Christian doctrine,” Emerson and Stamps assert that the reason for these departures is due to a difference in theological method. In other words, a commitment to Scripture as the sole and final authority is insufficient for any theology to be truly biblical unless it adopts a certain theological method which will ensure that it would be truly biblical.

Emerson and Stamps argue for their theological method against what they call “biblicism.”<sup>3</sup> According to them. “biblicism” is a method that “seeks to interpret the biblical text, as far as is possible, without any outside any outside influence, particularly any undue creedal or confessional influence.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than embrace this “biblicist” hermeneutic, Emerson and Stamps argue for a method that reads the Bible “in a way that is guided by the Spirit,”<sup>5</sup> that has “its primary place of biblical and theological formation” in “the local church,”<sup>6</sup> that is “exegetically grounded,” “canonically patterned” (reading in light of the entire canon of Scripture) and “creedally ruled,”<sup>7</sup> which is to say that the biblical interpretation is to be “ruled” via creeds and confessions as the *regula fidei* (the rule of faith).<sup>8</sup> Lastly, it must be “dogmatically guided,” which means that it

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Y. Emerson and Luke Stamps, “On Trinitarian Theological Method,” In Keith S. Whitfield, ed., *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Application* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 95-128

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-3

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

must “deal with the logical, theological, and ethical implications of biblical texts and how those implications impinge on the broader fabric of Christian doctrine.”<sup>9</sup>

Having sketched out their hermeneutical principle, Emerson and Stamps turn to the doctrine of the Trinity. They state that the New Testament “holds in tension the oneness of God, on the one hand, and the coequality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, on the other.”<sup>10</sup> Emerson and Stamps then move into the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* and into the classical theist doctrine of the Trinity, stating that these concepts of classical theism “grow organically from Scripture,”<sup>11</sup> including the term “partitive exegesis,” which is “the common patristic strategy of determining whether a biblical passage is speaking of the Son of God in terms of his deity or in terms of his humanity.”<sup>12</sup> All of this on the Trinity is then mustered against primarily the ERAS<sup>13</sup> model of people like Bruce Ware. On how we are to think of how the three persons relate to one another, Emerson and Stamps ultimately fall back on a call to apophaticism or negative theology, stating that we should not venture to ask these types of questions since “God is *sui generis*.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Assessing Emerson’s and Stamps’ points of theological method**

Emerson and Stamps have put forward an intricate proposal on theological method and the Trinity but does it work? I would like to start by examining their positive proposal on theological method. Now, it is of course true that a verbal profession to Scripture being the sole and final authority does not mean that a person is indeed following Scripture. But since verbal profession is not the same as actual commitment, Emerson’s and Stamps’ observation is insufficient for showing us whether we need a commitment to their proposed theological method on top of a commitment to biblical authority, in order to be faithful to Scripture.

#### 1) Spirit-led

On the points of Emerson’s and Stamps’ proposal, the first point that Scripture is to be read in a way that is guided by the Holy Spirit is certainly true inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is the one that guides believers into all truth (c.f. Jn. 14:26, 1 Cor. 2:10-16). The problem however is that Emerson and Stamps have not indicated how this works out. Presumably, no Bible believing Christian would assert that their interpretation is not something taught to them from the Holy Spirit, so this point is manifestly insufficient to

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 104

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 107

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 120

<sup>13</sup> Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission. Also sometimes called “Eternal Functional Submission” (EFS), or “Eternal Submission of the Son” (ESS), and derogatorily termed “eternal subordinationism.”

<sup>14</sup> Emerson and Stamps, in Whitfield, 122-3

establish a hermeneutic, a point which they themselves acknowledge.<sup>15</sup> The question remains as to how this theological method engages the issue of the grammatical historical (G-H) or the redemptive-historical (R-H) method of biblical interpretation as a “scientific” method.<sup>16</sup>

More specifically, while we agree that it is the Holy Spirit that leads us into all truth, the issue is whether the method we use is a “scientific” method that can be clearly seen in Scripture even by unbelievers. The embrace of the G-H or the R-H method implies that the method itself is accessible to all, believers and unbelievers alike, and that the place of the Holy Spirit in interpretation is of showing the truth to be true wisdom, while unbelievers can access biblical truths but will treat them as foolishness (c.f. 1 Cor. 2: 14). In other words, traditionally, we treat biblical interpretation as something that unbelievers can cognitively do but are morally unable to do rightly. Whether Emerson and Stamps would agree with this is unclear here.

## 2) Ecclesially located and Creedally ruled

Emerson and Stamps paired this first point with the point on being ecclesially located, where the “primary place of biblical and theological formation” is “the local church.” They then conflate that with the issue of interpreting Scripture with the community of the saints, which is a different issue altogether. Perhaps their idea of being ecclesially located in the local church is an expression of Baptist autonomy of the local church, but if that is true then there is an unresolved tension as to how that autonomy coexists with the entire community of the saints. If, however, one jettisons the idea that there is local church autonomy for biblical interpretation, then what we have can be taken to mean two possible different things. Interpreted in a way consistent with Reformed orthodoxy, to assert that one must take into account the interpretation of the community of saints mean that one considers their interpretation of Scripture, such that one is not doing exegesis by oneself *de novo*. However, one is not constrained to any one interpretation just because it has historical pedigree, or reject any interpretation because of its absence. Such an interpretation of what being ecclesial located is in line with Reformed orthodoxy, where it is stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF):

The supreme judged by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions or ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (WCF 1.10)

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>16</sup> By “scientific” method, I am using the term “science” in its older meaning of “*scientia*” or knowledge. A “scientific” method is a method accessible for study to everyone regardless of status of regeneration, as opposed to an esoteric method that is only accessible to a few.

All synods or councils, since the apostles' time, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore, they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but are to be used as a help in both. (WCF 31.3)

Note that in WCF31.3, councils and synods are to be used as a help, but are not to be made the rule of faith or practice. In other words, the Reformed orthodox view of interpretation as it relates to the community of saints is precisely the action of taking account historical views and using them for our benefit, but none of them are to be treated as definitive for our faith.

The second way of interpreting the idea of being “ecclesially located” however is much more worrisome. Emerson’s and Stamps’ proposal can mean something more like Roman Catholicism’s idea of *Sola Ecclesia*, where the interpretation of tradition by the church acts as a rule of faith, precisely what WCF31.3 rejects. In this view, whatever is rejected by tradition or not found in tradition is rejected in principle, apart from examining Scripture. In this second view, tradition is the *regula fidei*, circumscribing what is to be considered acceptable interpretations.

We thus look at Emersons’ and Stamps’ point that interpretation is to be “creedally ruled,” where we perhaps can decipher what they mean by stating that interpretation is to be ecclesially located. What they have written however is not much help. Emerson and Stamps reject the idea that “ruled” has “the sense of ‘dominate’ or ‘have power over.’”<sup>17</sup> They thus seem to reject *Sola Ecclesia*. But then, what does it mean for interpretation to be “ruled”? Here, there is no discussion of how the creeds and councils relate to biblical interpretation, just an assertion that somehow, we must accept that “creeds and confessions” “accurately reflect the biblical narrative and its teaching.”<sup>18</sup> How and in what way do creeds and confessions function? Emerson and Stamps are not clear on this. Do they function so as to prescribe what is acceptable or non-acceptable theological discourse *a priori*? If that is the case, then creeds and confessions do indeed “dominate” and “have power over” theological discourse, contrary to what Emerson and Stamps disavow. But if creeds and confessions do not prescribe what is acceptable or non-acceptable theological discourse *a priori*, then in what manner do they regulate the Christian faith?

The Reformed orthodox view of creeds and confessions is that they rule the faith *a posteriori*. Creeds and Confessions are the *norma normata* (the normed norms), whereas Scripture is the *norma normans non normata* (the norming norm that is not normed). In other words, creeds and confessions can never be the rule of faith in a primary sense, but must always yield to Scripture. In any debate over theology therefore, one can only appeal to creeds and confessions as supporting evidences, not as evidences for one’s position. The Reformed view that synods and councils can err (c.f. WCF 31.3) mean that one cannot appeal to them unless both parties already accept what they say to be true. It is true of course that the Reformed orthodox utilize

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<sup>17</sup> Emerson and Stamps, in Whitfield, 103

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, and they accept the first four ecumenical councils. But that is beside the point, because nowhere in the Reformed orthodox view is there an exclusion of creeds and confessions from the life of the church. The issue is not whether we use creeds and confessions. The issue is what the role of creeds and confessions are in the church.

The problem therefore with Emersons and Stamps is that they are manifestly unclear as to how creeds and confessions are to function in interpretation. There is however a tendency in their description of what "creedally ruled" means that point towards their likely position that creeds and confessions are to be treated as pseudo-primary authorities. Thus, creeds and confessions, while officially stated to be secondary authorities, are nevertheless in practice treated as primary authorities for determining whether something is biblical or not. After all, if creeds and confessions are secondary authorities, then one does not start with the creeds and confessions in theological discussion. One would not axiomatically state that "classical Christian doctrine," however one defines it, is to be treated as the default position of Christian orthodoxy.<sup>19</sup>

### 3) Exegetically grounded, canonically ruled, and dogmatically guided

Emerson and Stamps are indeed correct in pointing out the importance of exegesis for biblical interpretation, as well as asking us to consider all of Scripture in our biblical interpretation, and the need to consider the implications of our Christian doctrine. Among their six points, perhaps these three are the least controversial for evangelicals.

The question however is raised as to how exegesis is done. This is particularly of concern since Emerson and Stamps took over the terminology of "partitive exegesis" from the academy. As defined in the chapter, "partitive exegesis" is "the common patristic strategy of determining whether a biblical passage is speaking of the Son of God in terms of his deity or in terms of his humanity."<sup>20</sup> Since we hold that Jesus in his incarnation is both fully God and fully man, with two natures that are distinct but not separate, therefore it is a legitimate question to ask if the Son is doing something "in his divine nature," or "in his human nature." The concern here is that normally, we do that as part of our theology, because dyophysite Christology (Christ having two distinct but not separate natures) is theology not exegesis. One has to engage in exegesis, synthesize the various truths of Scripture, and then undertake theological reflection, to come up with dyophysitism. There is a reason why the doctrine that Christ has two natures was not explicitly taught in the first century AD, because it is not a teaching that is found from a surface reading of Scripture.

The academy is the academy. They can call the patristic interpretation of the text of Scripture "partitive exegesis" all they want. But bible believers need to be clear on what exegesis is, and where theology begins. Exegesis must be derived from the text

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 120

of Scripture alone, where theology can admit of philosophy and other sciences as supporting aids. Since Protestants hold to the final authority of Scripture, while distinguishing Scripture from all other sources of knowledge, therefore it is important for Protestants to know where Scripture and exegesis ends, and where theology begins. Scripture is infallible, exegesis is infallible if done rightly, whereas theology is always imperfect because we do not have necessarily have all the truth, and other sources of knowledge are fallible.

It is therefore worrisome that Emerson and Stamps have chosen to uncritically accept the term of “partitive exegesis,” and thus the concept that the church fathers are doing proper exegesis when they comment on the texts of Scripture. Now, while we should respect the church fathers, they are not God and their writings do not have the same authority as Scripture (c.f. WCF 31.3). While respecting their contribution to orthodoxy, we are free to disagree with the way they may have conducted their interpretation of Scripture even where we may ultimately agree with their theological conclusions. But such nuances of appreciation seem missing in Emerson’s and Stamps’ essay here. The church fathers seem to have an authority beyond what they as fallible human beings should bear. Honor the church fathers to be sure, but they should not be treated as more authoritative just because they are the “pro-Nicene generation.”

In conclusion, out of the six points of Emerson’s and Stamps’ proposed theological method, there is considerable fuzziness over the specifics of certain points, and much to be concerned about, especially the beginning assertion claiming that fidelity to Scripture without a theological method is insufficient. Most certainly nobody will want to be against being led by the Spirit, but what that is is not clear. Most will want biblical interpretation to have an ecclesial focus, but likewise, clarity is missing. “Creedally ruled” should be fleshed out more to differentiate between that which is in line with Protestant convictions and that which is not. Of the three points that most would have no problems with, exegetically grounded, canonically ruled and dogmatically guided, there is a major concern over confusing exegesis and theologizing. In sum, the theological method advocated by Emerson and Stamps has major flaws that render it unsuitable for bible-believing Christians to adopt.

### **On the issue of “biblicism”**

Emerson and Stamps state unequivocally that they see “departures from classical Christian doctrine” as being “a function of theological method,” blaming “biblicism” for such departures. “Biblicism” according to Emerson and Stamps is a stance of interpretation where “the biblical text, as far as is possible,” is to be interpreted “without any outside influence, particularly any undue creedal or confessional influence.”<sup>21</sup> Emerson and Stamps essentially map the idea of ‘Solo Scriptura,’ or ‘me and my Bible

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

in the woods,' onto the term "biblicism."<sup>22</sup> But is that a fair representation of the term and of opponents to their view on the Trinity?

To answer the question, we must see where the term comes from. "Biblicism," as opposed to "biblical literalism," is a term coined by David Bebbington in his groundbreaking book on Evangelicalism, where biblicism is defined as "a particular regard for the Bible," where "all spiritual truths are to be found in its pages."<sup>23</sup> Bebbington encompasses all Evangelicals throughout the centuries within the term "biblicism," seeing "biblicism" as a positive marker of Evangelicalism, one of the points in his quadrilateral.<sup>24</sup> Biblicism in this sense is merely a statement that contrasts bible believing Christians from traditional Anglicans and Roman Catholics who hold to the authority of traditions. Anyone who holds to and practices *Sola Scriptura* according to Bebbington is a biblicist.

Naturally, if we are to understand biblicism historically, it is insufficient to assert that it is merely someone who holds to and practices *Sola Scriptura*. Although Bebbington does not state it thus, a contrast of Evangelicalism as seen in the First Great Awakening with the Reformation era on the issue of authority would yield more qualifications on the term "biblicism." As it can be seen, biblicism is a view that only Scripture is applicable to all of life at the expense of systematic thinking and systematic theology. Evangelicals from the beginning were anti-systematic thinkers, holding that systems were "distant from the facts," and thus "bound to generate differences of opinion," which is considered bad in the evangelical ethos.<sup>25</sup> We note here that Evangelicalism is not averse to church history and theological retrieval, having recovered the doctrine of Calvinism multiple times throughout its history. Therefore, it is historically inaccurate to assert that biblicism is ahistorical, or that it is the same as *Solo Scriptura*, or mere private interpretation apart from the church. Biblicism therefore in the fuller historical sense should be defined as "a particular regard for the Bible which assert that all spiritual truths are found in it, while being antipathic to and eschewing systematic thinking on biblical doctrine."

The evolution of Bebbingtonian "biblicism" into what Emerson and Stamps call "biblicism" would be a fascinating study, but part of it stems from anti-evangelical polemics as part of the conservative wing of the New Evangelical Calvinist "recovery" of history and the Reformed confessions. As the Bebbington Quadrilateral goes mainstream, those who have an axe to grind against Evangelicalism take these terms definitional of Evangelicalism and imbue them with new meaning. Biblicism has

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<sup>22</sup> "Biblicism" according to Emerson and Stamps would match Tradition 0 in Heiko Oberman's taxonomy of the relation between Scripture and Tradition. It fits the liberals and anabaptists, not evangelicals. [See M. Lee, "Scripture and Tradition" in Daniel H Chew and Jonah Tang, eds., *Faith Seeking Understanding—Volume 1: The Legacy of the Reformed Tradition* (Proceedings from the 2009 CREDO500 Conference; San Jacinta, CA: Daniel H Chew, 2020. Kindle Edition)]

<sup>23</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Francis and Taylor, 2005. Kindle Edition), 12

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 58. The aversion to controversy on doctrinal matters helps to define the activism aspect of Evangelicalism.

become the bogeyman of biblical literalism, when the reason why the term “biblicism” exists is that it is a positive characteristic that covers both conservative and liberal Evangelicals, even those who do not hold to views like biblical inerrancy.<sup>26</sup>

Emerson’s and Stamps’ definition of the term “biblicism” has some similarity with the definition coined by David Bebbington. The term however is better used according to his original intent and context, and the Bebbingtonian definition of a “biblicist” does not necessarily reject creeds or confessions, just their utility. That said, is the substance of Emerson’s and Stamps’ assault on “biblicism” (as defined according to them) correct?

On this, I would suggest not. The core idea of Emerson’s and Stamps’ term “biblicism” is a rejection of history. But this critique of supposed departures due to “biblicism” is valid only if those who reject the “classical views” reject history, historical theology, and creeds and confessions. But that is false. We read Augustine, Athanasius, and Aquinas, and we agree with them at points. The main issue is not some supposed rejection of historical theology but rather how we are to conceive of the task of systematic theology today. The ressourcement classical theologians want to return to Thomistic metaphysics and “start anew” upon this foundation in the supposed golden age of orthodoxy. They have mostly given up on the task of engaging the modern questions and believe that a repristination of Nicaea is all that is needed for today. The rest of us however are more interested in dealing with the questions both ancient and modern, and we hold no age to be sacrosanct much less the age of Thomas Aquinas. We do not award certain eras and certain philosophies privileged positions in theology, and that is why some who are careless have departed from orthodoxy (e.g. Clark Pinnock). But the solution is not to retreat to the past but to be more biblical. The solution to *Solo Scriptura* is not tradition but more Scripture. The solution for Bebbington’s biblicism is likewise more Scripture. Or do we not believe in the power of the Word of God, which alone is able to make us wise (2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Peter 1:19)? How did the Reformers come to formulate doctrinal treatises, and how did the Westminster divines come to write the Confession of faith, when they had no prior Protestant systematic theologies and confessions to begin with? Was it not by meditating on Scripture in its fullness that Reformed orthodoxy came into being in the first place, not by an attempt to recover Thomas Aquinas?

### **On the Trinity**

The most substantial part of Emerson’s and Stamps’ essay is on the topic of theological method. On the issue of the Trinity, there is nothing particularly interesting since it is a rehash of the arguments of classical theism. I would certainly agree with Emerson and Stamps that the issue is one of theological method, for the simple reason that their position on the Trinity depends on their taking classical metaphysics to be true. For example, we are told, without evidence or argument, that the “mind and will

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<sup>26</sup> Bebbington, 13-14



are distinct ways of signifying the one divine *ousia*,<sup>27</sup> or that will “is an ontological reality.”<sup>28</sup> But those of us who question or reject these philosophical assumptions do not see Scripture teaching any of these, and do not see why we should allow classical metaphysics, not taught in Scripture, to have a say on this issue. Rather, we see problems with the classical doctrines, at least one of which led to Emerson and Stamps just throwing their hands up and asserting apopathicism.<sup>29</sup> But that is to fail to understand the historical presence of apopathicism as a reaction to Neo-Platonism and how the Christian church has responded to it.<sup>30</sup> To put it simply, Christian apopathicism is a prohibition against peering into the being of God to see things that He has not revealed, not for us to use it as an excuse for any theological difficulty we are unable to solve due to our philosophical presuppositions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Emerson and Stamps have proposed a grand project of theological method. However, when examined, there is much vagueness about the project, lending itself to either orthodox or heterodox versions of many of these points. Put together, they seem to subtly undermine *Sola Scriptura*, as they attack the bogeyman of “biblicism,” a term which they appropriate, for the purpose of ressourcement.

In this review, I have not put forward much on theology proper, because that is ancillary to the main point of Emerson’s and Stamps’ essay. It is theoretically possible to take a different approach and attempt to defend classical theism, which is why issues concerning theology proper are less discussed in this review.

As I have shown, Emerson’s and Stamps’ theological method is vague and could be interpreted in heterodox ways. That is the main concern over the theological method, more than whether classical theism is right or wrong. Even if classical theism is true, the theological method promoted by Emerson and Stamps runs the risk of undermining *Sola Scriptura* and turning Protestants back to Roman Catholicism. Thomas Aquinas is not called the angelic doctor of the Roman Catholic Church for no reason, and the magnification of his thought is not healthy for the cause of Reformation.

May God bring clarity of thought on this issue, and let us turn away from the theological method of the new ressourcement theologians.

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<sup>27</sup> Emerson and Stamps, in Whitfield, 111.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 123

<sup>30</sup> See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1957), 39-42. See also Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (SUNY Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13; John Meyendorff, “Introduction,” in Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, III. ii. 6; this version Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* (The Classics of Western Spirituality; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 20