preacher is a commissioned agent whose task is to speak because God has spoken, because the preacher has been entrusted with the telling of the gospel of the Son who saves, and because God has promised the power of the Spirit as the seal and efficacy of the preacher’s calling.

The ground of the preaching is none other than the revelation that God has addressed to us in Scripture. The goal of preaching is no more and no less than faithfulness to this calling. The glory of preaching is that God has promised to use preachers and preaching to accomplish His purpose and bring glory unto Himself.

Therefore, a theology of preaching is essentially doxology. The ultimate purpose of the sermon is to glorify God and to reveal a glimpse of His glory to his creation. This is the sum and substance of the preaching task. That God would choose such a means to express His own glory is beyond our understanding; it is rooted in the mystery of the will and wisdom of God.

Yet our God has called out preachers and commanded them to preach. Preaching is not an act the church is called to defend, but a ministry preachers are called to perform. And as we are well reminded, we are not called to accomplish this task alone. The Holy Spirit is the seal and promise of our preaching. Thus, whatever the season, the imperative stands: Preach the Word!

SBJT: What elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are largely overlooked in substantial swaths of today’s evangelicalism? And what are the practical implications of such neglect?
D. A. Carson: The question is a bit cheeky, of course, since it assumes that much is wrong. All of us know fine evangelical churches that are carefully trying to teach the whole counsel of God. While majoring on biblical exposition, they are also enthusiastic about teaching sufficient historical and systematic theology to give their members a sense of the historical continuity and of the doctrinal heritage of the people of God. Nevertheless, it is doubtless fair to assert that in many churches the doctrine of the Trinity is merely asserted, or in some cases merely assumed, but never or at best rarely taught. When was the last time you heard a good sermon on the subject, complete with careful demonstration of its pastoral and spiritual relevance?

A responsible answer to the question could easily be expanded into a book. I shall restrict myself to five observations, briefly put:

(1) There are few attempts to show how the texts of the Bible came to generate what came to be called, in the patristic period, the doctrine of the Trinity. It makes little difference, of course, that the word “Trinity” is not found in the Scriptures, provided the concept is. Nevertheless, distinctions regarding three “persons” and one “substance” were fought-over attempts, during the patristic period, to try to handle all the biblical evidence, instead of just part of it.

Such attempts, of course, constitute a subset of the broader responsibility to move carefully from Scripture itself to systematic articulations of truth—i.e.,
articulations that are in fact summaries of more than any one passage, articulations often cast in the terminology of contemporary culture. Showing believers how this is done, and giving historical examples of how it has been done well, and how it has been done badly, becomes an exercise in teaching them basic interpretive skills—not to mention the sense of solidarity it engenders with believers in other centuries who, no less than we, had to wrestle with how to understand the Bible faithfully, and not least how to respond to assorted pernicious reductionisms.

(2) Careful instruction about the Trinity will draw believers to greater contemplation and adoration of who God is. When the tone of the instruction is deeply edifying, congregations usually lap up careful, thoughtful, biblically-demonstrated truth—not least truth about God, our blessed Maker and Redeemer. The alternative is to be so sloppy about how we think of God that the sloppiness spills over into our everyday speech, and even into our praying: e.g., “Heavenly Father, we just want to thank you for dying on the cross for us.” The Father did not die on the cross, of course: to say he did is to fall into the ancient heresy called patripassionism. Must we not carefully observe the distinctive works of the members of the Godhead, as well as all that binds them? The result of careful preaching and teaching on the Trinity is that in our thinking and praying, we will be contemplating God as he has disclosed himself to us, rather than pretending that zeal and clichés are an adequate defense against sloppiness and even heresy.

Sometimes introductory knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity issues in distinctions that are too tightly drawn. Some argue, for instance, that all Christian prayer should address the Father in the name of the Son by the power of the Spirit. Certainly that is one way the New Testament writers depict prayer, but it is far from the only one. Both the Father and the Son are explicitly addressed in prayer in the Scriptures. While prayer to the Spirit is not explicitly exemplified, the deity of the Spirit is affirmed, as also is his function as our Advocate (cf. John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1)—and that function itself authorizes prayer, for he, like the Son, simultaneously represents us and pleads our case. See especially the elegant essay by Edmund P. Clowney, “A Biblical Theology of Prayer,” in Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter: Paternoster, 1990), 136-73.

(3) In particular, the church must constantly go over the biblical materials that ground belief in Jesus as both God and man, not only so as to preserve sound doctrine, but so as to integrate these realities with all that Jesus accomplished, and with all that he continues to be: he will forever be both God and a human being, our elder brother. There are huge implications not only for understanding what he achieved on the cross, and not only for his high priestly ministry (read Hebrews!), but also for what we become when we finally share in his resurrection. Moreover, there are approaches to such issues that go beyond a handful of proof-texts (e.g., John 1:1; 20:28; Rom 9:5), even if those texts are important. The crucial “Son” passage, John 5:16-30, for instance, needs to be carefully thought through—a helpful way, incidentally, of clearing up at least some of the deep misapprehensions that Muslims have when we Christians confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

(4) Perhaps nowhere is the doctrine of
the Trinity more important than in our meditation upon the love of God. One may usefully compare what the Bible says in this regard with what the Qur’an says about Allah. Islam stresses God’s transcendence, his utter independence of his creatures, and strongly insists he is merciful toward them, but it barely mentions his love. (A good place to start finding out more about the Qur’an, in conjunction with actually reading it, is Mateen Elass, Understanding the Koran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004].) Christianity stresses the same characteristics, of course—God’s transcendence, his independence (his “aseity,” the Puritans would have said), his mercy—but adds that God is loving. Indeed, the Bible goes so far as to say that God is love, a clause you cannot find in the Qur’an. In the Old Testament, where the picture of God being a complex unity is still blurred, God’s love is displayed in his care for his world, in the way he entreats sinners, in his love for his chosen covenant people. (I have described the different ways the Bible speaks of the love of God in The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God [Wheaton: Crossway, 2000].) Sooner or later, however, one cannot help but wonder in what precise sense it is proper to talk about God’s love in eternity past. There is some deep sense in which God loves himself, of course (it is worth reading John Piper, The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God [Portland: Multnomah, 1991]), yet since all we know of love is its “other”-orientation, then when God was the only being that existed, what precisely would it mean to confess that even “then” (if we may use a time category for eternity past), “God is love”? Here the New Testament Scriptures provide more food for thought. Twice we are told that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20); similarly, we are told that the Son loves the Father (John 14:31). Nor are we to think that this love is restricted to the days of the Son’s incarnation. The love of the Father for the Son stretches back before the creation of the world (John 17:24). In short, precisely because the one God of the Bible is a complex unity, a Trinity, space is created to appreciate more fully how even with respect to eternity past, it is entirely coherent to confess, “God is love,” and maintain something of the “other”-orientation to the nature of love. Indeed, the love among the persons of the Godhead becomes the supreme model of the love that Christians are to display for other believers—a love which substantially constitutes their unity (John 17:20-26).

(5) Revelation itself is tied to the doctrine of the Trinity. Although God has spoken words, his final “Word” is the incarnated Son, who perfectly reflects him and displays the effulgence of his glory (John 1:1-18; Heb 1:1-4). Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is the revelation provided by the Son as tightly tied to the Son’s relation to the Father as in John 5:16-30, to which I have already referred—but of course there are many passages where that relation is presupposed (e.g., Col 1:15-20). Throughout his ministry, the Son is aided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit himself comes as the Paraclete who succeeds the Son and replaces him this side of the resurrection and ascension, until the Son returns. Among his tasks is the manner in which he directs people to the Son, and thus to God’s revelation in the Son. All of the persons of the Godhead are united in a complex, integrated, role-specific commitment to the self-disclosure of God in what we call “revelation”—all
designed to bring himself glory and to benefit his people. A very long essay would not begin to survey the wealth of biblical texts and themes that intertwine on this subject.

SBJT: Can you discuss the practical importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the church today?

Carl Trueman: The doctrine of the Trinity is probably one of the most important and, at the same time, one of the most neglected essential points of Christian teaching in evangelicalism. One of the reasons for this is the fact that evangelicalism, like Protestantism in general, has historically tended to define itself over against Roman Catholicism; and the Trinity was not a substantial point of disagreement between the two traditions. Attitudes toward justification, authority, and the sacraments have thus been more central to the identity of evangelicalism.

A further problem is probably the speculative appearance of much Trinitarian theology. The language used to articulate classic Trinitarian theology—person, essence, substance, hypostasis—would seem at first glance to be both abstruse and unbiblical, not simply in the obvious sense that it is not found in the Bible, but in the deeper sense that it carries with it connotations of Greek metaphysics and a world which seems far removed from the dynamic of the biblical history of redemption.

Nonetheless, even a cursory examination of the history of the doctrine indicates that the Trinity is both a key Christian doctrine and, for all of its complexity, one which is crucial to even the least theologically literate believer. In the early centuries after Christ, one of the basic questions which preoccupied the church was that of the identity of Jesus Christ, and this was no ivory tower discussion. At the heart of the matter lay two very practical concerns: what exactly did Christians mean when they cried out in praise, “Jesus is Lord!”? And what was the significance of the linking of the Son and the Spirit to the Father in the baptismal formula? These two basic concerns provided the essential dynamic for Christological and, ultimately, Trinitarian thinking in the first four centuries.

Thus, the doctrine is, in origin, intimately connected to the most basic practical acts of Christian worship, acts in which all believers are involved.

Given this, the complex conceptual vocabulary which the church developed to express the doctrine can be seen not so much as abstract metaphysics but as an attempt to articulate the ontological foundations for the economy of salvation. Put less pretentiously, Trinitarian language expresses that which must be true in terms of God’s eternal nature in order for the biblical account of the history of salvation to make sense, and for the worship that results to make sense. Of course, given the infinite nature of God and the finite nature of his revelation, it is ultimately impossible for finite language to do full justice to God as he is in himself. Thus, to the finite mind, the idea of God as one and God as three seems a straightforward absurdity; yet that is what scripture plainly teaches. The metaphysical language used to express this should therefore be seen as an attempt to unpack this teaching and should be understood in negative terms: to say Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one substance is not so much to make a positive assertion as to deny that any one person of the Trinity has an ontological priority and superiority to the others; to say that they are

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