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He Will Give Life:

The Trinitarian Progression of Romans 1-8

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One of the most densely packed Trinitarian verses in the Bible is Rom. 8:11, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (ESV). In one verse, Paul spans the whole range of salvation according to the pattern of God, Christ, and the Spirit. God promises to give the resurrection life of Christ through his Spirit indwelling believers.

This trinitarian pattern marks not only this verse, but also the intricate, progressive argument that Paul builds across the first eight chapters of Romans.¹ Although many scholars see this progression as mainly soteriological, some scholars observe that the soteriological argument in Rom. 1-8 follows a trinitarian pattern. For these scholars, Paul starts with God the Father at the beginning of Rom. 1-8, continues with Christ, and culminates the argument with the Spirit in Rom. 8.² However, these scholars merely observe a trinitarian pattern without demonstrating it in detail across Rom. 1-8. For the most part, the trinitarian pattern of Rom. 1-8 has been overlooked or underdeveloped.

If Paul does follow a trinitarian pattern across Rom. 1-8, that means the doctrine of the Trinity is not just a theological conclusion, but also a hermeneutical principle for God’s self-revelation. It helps us follow Paul’s thought not just about the gospel, but about the God who saves. As Michael Gorman argues, “Paul’s Trinity is experienced and narrated as the

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2017), 438; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2018), 493; N. T. Wright, *Into the Heart of Romans: A Deep Dive into Paul’s Greatest Letter*, 1st ed (HarperCollins, 2023), 13, 22.

² Arthur William Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (SPCK, 1962), 257; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (P&R Publishing, 2013), 441–42; Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, New Studies in Dogmatics (Zondervan, 2016), 206; Fred Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology* (Eerdmans, 2021), 126.

mysterious key to the divine drama of salvation.”³ That this is a hermeneutical principle means that the Trinity is not always on the surface for Paul. As Fred Sanders notes, “A Trinitarian subplot or baseline seems to underlie everything Paul does.”⁴ Missing Paul’s trinitarianism in Rom. 1-8 means missing some of the structure underlying Paul’s gospel and his understanding of the Christian life.

This paper will outline the trinitarian-soteriological progression of Rom. 1-8. First, a review of the literature will demonstrate the viability and usefulness of a trinitarian-soteriological outline of Rom. 1-8. Second, an explanation of the study’s methodology will outline the parameters for a trinitarian reading of Rom. 1-8. Third, an analysis of Paul’s argument in Rom. 1-8 will demonstrate how Paul’s soteriological argument follows a trinitarian progression. This paper will conclude with implications for further reflection.

The Trinity and Paul

A study of trinitarianism in the New Testament seemed academically dubious just a few decades ago,⁵ but recent scholarly developments strongly support trinitarian readings of Paul. The following literature review will connect trinitarianism to three fields related to Paul: Pauline studies, Pauline theology, and the epistle to the Romans.⁶ The resulting insights will support three core elements of this paper: Paul is a trinitarian, Paul has a trinitarian soteriology, and Rom. 1-8 follows a trinitarian-soteriological progression.

³ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 20th Anniversary (Eerdmans, 2021), 74.

⁴ Sanders, *The Triune God*, 206.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, “[Review of Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters by W. Hill],” *Themelios* 41, no. 1 (2016): 118.

⁶ To clarify, “Pauline studies” designates the exegetical task of interpreting Paul’s epistles as a subset of New Testament studies, while “Pauline theology” designates the theological task of systematizing those exegetical findings into a coherent theology of Paul. This review of the literature will reveal the strong connection between theology proper and soteriology that Paul expresses in trinitarian terms.

The Trinity and Pauline Studies

First, Paul is a trinitarian. That may not be particularly controversial among evangelicals, but this insight has only recently gained stronger academic support. While some emphasize a disconnect between Paul's epistles and trinitarian doctrinal developments,⁷ a growing trend of scholarship emphasizes continuity between the Pauline corpus and trinitarianism.⁸ Swain outlines two main approaches to this continuity: a developmental relationship between the "undeveloped" trinitarianism in Scripture and the "developed" trinitarianism of the creeds,⁹ and a grammatical relationship between the fluent speech of biblical trinitarianism and the grammar of creedal trinitarianism.¹⁰ Swain explains two advantages of the grammatical approach: it maintains the priority of biblical trinitarianism, and it views creedal trinitarianism as following Scripture rather than refining biblical trinitarianism.¹¹ This bridges the gap between Paul and trinitarianism.

One way that Pauline scholars follow this grammatical approach is through the concept of "relations." Hill describes "relations" as "the mutual involvement of the trinitarian persons in the identities of the other persons: *each person is only identifiable by*

⁷ Donald H. Juel, "The Trinity and the New Testament," *Theology Today* 54, no. 3 (1997): 313–24.

⁸ Chris Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian," in *Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (Cascade Books, 2018), 36–45.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, "Paul and the Trinity: The Experience of Christ and the Spirit for Paul's Understanding of God," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis et al. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 49–51; Ben Witherington and Laura Michaels Ice, *The Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son, and Spirit in Biblical Perspective* (Eerdmans, 2002), xi; Scott Swain, "The Bible and the Trinity in Recent Thought: Review, Analysis, and Constructive Proposal," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60, no. 1 (2017): 39–40.

¹⁰ Frances M. Young and David Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*, Biblical Foundations in Theology (SPCK, 1987), 256–57; Richard B. Hays, "The God of Mercy Who Rescues Us from the Present Evil Age: Romans and Galatians," in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology*, ed. A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera (Westminster John Knox, 2002), 141; Swain, "The Bible and the Trinity in Recent Thought: Review, Analysis, and Constructive Proposal," 40; C. Kevin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 11, no. 3 (2002): 306.

¹¹ Swain, "The Bible and the Trinity in Recent Thought: Review, Analysis, and Constructive Proposal," 40.

means of reference to the others.”¹² Paul’s relational descriptions of God’s identity fundamentally include the saving activity of Christ and the Spirit.¹³ In Watson’s words, “the deity and the identity of God are bound up with those particular divine actions.”¹⁴ Similarly, Tilling argues that Paul’s trinitarianism includes not only relations between the persons, but the human’s relationship with God and Jesus as established by the Spirit and by grace.¹⁵ In other words, Paul’s relational approach draws a close connection between the Trinity and soteriology that reveals that he is a trinitarian.

The Trinity and Paul’s Theological Structure

Second, Paul’s trinitarian convictions structure his soteriology. This connects to a major project of Pauline scholarship, which involves accounting for the structure of Paul’s theology. In the second half of the twentieth century, scholarly debate on the structure of Pauline theology concentrated on ascertaining a “center” in Paul’s theology.¹⁶ A more recent structural proposal emphasizes a narrative substructure to Paul’s argument, following scholars like Hays and Wright.¹⁷ An approach that incorporates the strengths of both is looking at the trinitarian substructure of Paul’s theology, including his soteriology.

¹² Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Eerdmans, 2015), 44. Emphasis original.

¹³ Francis Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity: Reflections On Pauline God-Language, in Disagreement With J.D.G. Dunn,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23, no. 80 (2000): 105, 117–19, 122–23.

¹⁴ Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity,” 104.

¹⁵ Chris Tilling, “Paul, the Trinity, and Contemporary Trinitarian Debates,” *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 11 (2016): 25–26.

¹⁶ Joseph Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1989): 461–78; Don N Howell, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 601 (1994): 50–70; Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Zondervan, 2012), 541; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2020), 4.

¹⁷ Christoph Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach*, 1st ed (Eerdmans, 2024), 24; N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant: Christ And The Law In Pauline Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), 205–15; Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, 2nd ed (Eerdmans, 2002), 226–28.

The term “trinitarian substructure” in Pauline scholarship refers to the way Paul’s theology is implicitly shaped by the unity and distinction of God, Christ, and the Spirit.¹⁸ Paul does not explain his trinitarianism per se, but his trinitarianism functions under the surface to explain the gospel and other theological themes.¹⁹ When applied to his soteriology, Paul’s trinitarian substructure takes on a narrative dynamic. Fee draws attention to the strong connection between Paul’s trinitarianism and the story of salvation.²⁰ Gorman concurs, arguing that Paul narrates a “divine drama” featuring God, Christ, and the Spirit as the main characters and humanity as the audience that experiences the drama through the trinitarian acts of God.²¹ Sanders explains that Paul’s trinitarian-soteriological narration extends over long stretches of thought.²² Paul’s trinitarianism, then, takes on narrative qualities as he tells the gospel story of salvation, which is especially clear in Rom. 1-8.

The Trinity in Romans

Third, Paul’s trinitarian soteriology affects the very structure of Rom. 1-8. Within the broader debate regarding the structure of Rom. 1-8, the majority report locates the

¹⁸ The following scholars apply the term “trinitarian substructure” to Phil. 2:1-4, Eph. 6:1-14, 2 Cor., and Rom. 1-8 respectively: Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1995), 179; Darrell L. Bock, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 38; Young and Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*, 257; Sanders, *The Triune God*, 206.

¹⁹ Brian S. Rosner, “Paul and the Trinity,” in *The Essential Trinity: New Testament Foundations and Practical Relevance*, ed. Brandon D. Crowe and Carl R. Trueman (P&R Publishing, 2017), 134; A. Katherine Grieb, “People of God, Body of Christ, Koinonia of Spirit: The Role of Ethical Ecclesiology in Paul’s ‘Trinitarian’ Language,” *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 2 (2005): 227; Sanders, *The Triune God*, 206; Fred Sanders, “Pauline Epistles,” in *The Trinity in the Canon: A Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Practical Proposal*, ed. Brandon D. Smith (B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 247.

²⁰ Fee, “Paul and the Trinity: The Experience of Christ and the Spirit for Paul’s Understanding of God,” 52, 72.

²¹ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 74.

²² Sanders, “Pauline Epistles,” 251–52.

division between Rom. 1-4 and 5-8.²³ The minority reports place the division elsewhere, such as Rom. 1-5 and 6-8²⁴ or within Rom. 5.²⁵ Although these textual divisions employ some lexical and grammatical reasoning, they depend heavily on analyzing themes. Schreiner argues that detecting a break between Rom. 4 and 5 depends on thematic analysis.²⁶ The other approaches also argue for divisions on largely thematic grounds, particularly related to soteriology. A few scholars, however, detect a threefold pattern in Rom. 1-8 that looks at the work of God, Christ, and the Spirit.²⁷ Therefore a significant weakness in the emphasis on soteriology is that it obscures the trinitarian structure of Rom. 1-8.

Methodology

This paper defends the following thesis: Paul follows a trinitarian-soteriological progression in Rom. 1-8. The trinitarian-soteriological progression outlined by this paper includes a gospel introduction and three major movements: the righteousness of God, the redemption of Christ, and the regeneration of the Spirit. Each movement will contain two subsections. First, each movement will develop the soteriological progression by analyzing the main soteriological theme (i.e. righteousness, redemption, regeneration) of the main

²³ Charles D. Myers, "Chiastic Inversion in the Argument of Romans 3-8," *Novum Testamentum* 35, no. 1 (1993): 30; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (T&T Clark, 2004), 27-28; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker, 2018), 30, 253; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Romans: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), viii.

²⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1968), 211.

²⁵ Franz J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary*, trans. Harold Knight (The World Publishing Company, 1961), 131; Johan Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Fortress Press, 1980), 84-85.

²⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 253-54.

²⁷ Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament*, 257; Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 441-42; Sanders, *The Triune God*, 206; Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology*, 126.

divine person (i.e. God, Christ, and the Spirit). Second, each movement will develop the trinitarian progression by relating the activities of the divine persons to each other. Although each of the three major movements will focus on a particular divine person, each movement will also highlight how Paul progressively reveals the relations between God, Christ, and the Spirit in his gospel exposition.

The textual divisions fall into four stages.²⁸ The first stage covers Rom. 1:1-17 because of the passage's focus on "the gospel."²⁹ The second stage covers Rom. 1:17-3:26 because of the passage's focus on the righteousness of God, with Rom. 1:17 serving as a hinge between gospel and righteousness and Rom. 3:26 concluding the particular focus on God's righteousness.³⁰ The third stage covers Rom. 3:21-7:6 because of the transition from God's righteousness to Christ's redemption that begins in Rom. 3:21 and continues until the reference to the Spirit in Rom. 7:6,³¹ with Rom. 3:21-24 serving as the hinge between righteousness and redemption. The fourth stage covers Rom. 7:6-8:39 because of the focus on life in the Spirit (i.e. "regeneration") that begins in Rom. 7:6 and continues through Rom. 8:39,³² with Rom. 7:6 serving as a hinge between redemption and regeneration.

The Gospel of God: Romans 1:1-17

In Rom. 1:1-17, Paul introduces the trinitarian progression by focusing on the gospel of God. The main soteriological theme is the gospel of God. The trinitarian relation indicates that the gospel is of God, about his Son, and according to the Spirit. Together, these

²⁸ The proof of these divisions is in the pudding, so to speak, but they depend heavily on the Romans outlines in Moo and Schreiner, as well as the trinitarian outlines in Wainwright and Frame. None of these scholars adopt these particular divisions in their entirety.

²⁹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 37–73; Schreiner, *Romans*, 33–82.

³⁰ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 62–277; Schreiner, *Romans*, 66–216.

³¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 241–64, 443–47; Schreiner, *Romans*, 186–207, 343–51.

³² Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 445–47, 491–93; Schreiner, *Romans*, 350–51, 395–96.

introduce the progression by offering a preliminary outline of the gospel in which God, Christ, and the Spirit jointly participate.

Soteriological Progression: Gospel Introduction

Paul's introduction demonstrates the centrality of the gospel for his soteriological argument and, in turn, for his trinitarian-soteriological progression. The theme of the gospel sets the textual parameters of the introduction as 1:1-17. The term "gospel" appears at both the beginning (1:1) and end (1:15-17) of Paul's epistolary introduction, and it lies at the center of his theme statement in 1:16-17.³³ The gospel is central to Paul's introduction.

The content of Paul's "gospel" is the subject of some debate, but two elements in Romans secure widespread agreement. First, the "gospel of God" indicates that the gospel proceeds from God himself, testifying to his identity and actions.³⁴ Second, the gospel as "the power of God for salvation" indicates that the gospel speaks of the distinctly soteriological character of God's activity.³⁵ Both the Old Testament and Roman imperial context recognize a close connection between divine power and salvific effects.³⁶ Therefore, Paul's understanding of the gospel connects the identity of God with his powerful activity to save, thus making the gospel a main soteriological theme attached to a main divine person.

Paul does not only focus on God the Father in this section. He also prefigures the trinitarian progression of the whole epistle by describing the gospel in reference to God,

³³ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 27–28.

³⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, ed. David A. Hubbard et al., Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Word Books, 1988), 10; Gaventa, *Romans*, 25–26; Schreiner, *Romans*, 41.

³⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2016), 163–65; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 69–71.

³⁶ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, with Roy David Kotansky, Hermeneia (Fortress Press, 2006), 138.

Christ, and the Spirit respectively. Rom. 1:1-4 provides some initial indication of Paul's understanding of the unity and distinction of the three divine persons.³⁷ Paul unifies them with reference to the gospel yet distinguishes them by their roles in the gospel.

Furthermore, though he mentions Christ before God in 1:1 and after the Spirit in 1:4, Paul does follow a threefold order with the phrases "of God," "concerning his Son," and "according to the Spirit of holiness" (Rom. 1-4, ESV). A threefold order does not prove a distinctly *trinitarian* progression in terms of essential unity and personal distinction, but it does prefigure the order of Paul's trinitarian progression.

Another key element of Rom. 1:1-4 is its connection to Rom. 1:17. Commenting on Rom. 1:1-4, Schreiner notes how the gospel of God focuses on Christ his Son, who through his death and resurrection brings about the new age of the Spirit.³⁸ Since both 1:1-5 and 1:16-17 focus on the gospel,³⁹ the connection makes it possible to read 1:1-4 in light of 1:17 to demonstrate that the gospel summary in 1:1-4 reveals God's righteousness. Therefore, Paul's gospel introduction points to God's righteousness, Christ's work via his death and resurrection, and the life of the Spirit in connection with Christ's resurrection. These are the themes that Paul will develop in greater detail throughout Rom. 1-8.

Trinitarian Relation: Of God, Concerning his Son, According to the Spirit

The way that Paul brackets his introduction with the gospel also sheds light on the relations between God, Christ, and the Spirit. Paul says that the gospel is "of God" and "concerning his Son," with the latter's sonship announced "according to the Spirit of

³⁷ Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters*, 154–59; Watson, "The Triune Divine Identity," 121.

³⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 45–48.

³⁹ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 163–64, 167–68.

holiness” (Rom. 1:1-4, ESV). Hill notes that the Spirit defines Christ’s identity as the “Son of God in power” through the resurrection, in which the Spirit acts on Christ as an agent of God. Hill thus concludes that the three persons mutually identify each other by their relations to each other.⁴⁰ The mutual identification of God, Christ, and the Spirit in Rom. 1:3-4 thus indicate a unity and distinction consistent with trinitarianism.

Rom. 1:4 is key to Paul’s trinitarian introduction, and it has generated significant debate. First, there is some disagreement regarding the identity of “the Spirit of holiness.” Moo outlines the three main positions: Jesus’ divine nature, Jesus’ inward holiness, and the Holy Spirit who marks the new age.⁴¹ Moo argues that the first two positions diverge from Paul’s ordinary usage of “spirit,” particularly in view of Paul’s antithesis between flesh and spirit. The Pauline antithesis leads Moo to conclude that “Spirit of holiness” refers to the Holy Spirit as “part of Paul’s larger salvation-historical framework,” which involves a movement from the old age of the flesh to the new age of the Spirit.⁴² Even though the phrase does not refer to the Spirit elsewhere in the New Testament, it functions within Paul’s contrast in Romans between the flesh and the Holy Spirit.⁴³ Therefore, identifying the Holy Spirit in Rom. 1:4 as related to God and Christ coheres with Paul’s two-age framework.

Second, scholars also debate whether “was declared” in connection with Christ’s resurrection indicates an action by God or by the Spirit. Dunn argues for the former, indicating that the passive verb “was declared” indicates an action of God.⁴⁴ Though Dunn

⁴⁰ Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters*, 153–59.

⁴¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 47–48.

⁴² Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 48. See also Schreiner, *Romans*, 45–48.

⁴³ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 48; Schreiner, *Romans*, 47.

⁴⁴ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 13.

affirms that Rom. 1:4 includes a reference to the Spirit, he asserts that Paul usually avoids attributing Christ's resurrection to the Spirit, a practice that he applies here.⁴⁵ Dunn's view, however, fails to account for Paul's two-age framework, which necessarily includes the Spirit. The discussion of Christ's resurrection in Rom. 1:4 functions in Paul's two-age framework as the transition from the old age of the flesh to the new age of the Spirit.⁴⁶ Paul connects both the resurrection and the Spirit to the new age, thus relating the Spirit and the resurrection to each other. Therefore, the interpretation of the passive verb "was declared" requires some involvement of the Spirit.

Rom. 1:3-4 connects to Rom. 1:16-17 based on the theme of gospel-power. God exercises his power through the gospel to accomplish his saving purpose for the world,⁴⁷ but the power is not restricted to God the Father alone. Paul's use of the term "power" links 1:16 with 1:3-4, thereby including Christ within God's gospel-power.⁴⁸ These commentators do not mention the Spirit, but based on the discussion above, God's power in the resurrection should also include the Spirit. The gospel-power of God for salvation is a uniquely divine power that features a trinitarian-relational framework which includes God, Christ, and the Spirit.

The Righteousness of God: Romans 1:17-3:26

In Rom. 1:17-3:26, Paul connects the gospel of God to the righteousness of God. The main soteriological theme is the righteousness of God. The trinitarian relation is God's

⁴⁵ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 15.

⁴⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 48.

⁴⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 138-39.

⁴⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 33 (Yale University Press, 1993), 256; Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 164; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 69; Schreiner, *Romans*, 64.

unique transcendence. These advance the progression by setting God up as the initial righteous actor who will later work his righteousness through Christ and the Spirit.

Soteriological Progression: The Gospel Reveals God's Righteousness

The key soteriological theme described in relation to God is the revelation of his righteousness, which is directly connected to the gospel. The theme of God's righteousness sets the textual parameters as 1:17-3:26. The emphasis on God's righteousness overlaps with the focus on Christ's work, which warrants the overlapping textual divisions between the righteousness of God and the redemption of Christ. Schreiner rightly distinguishes God's saving righteousness in 1:17 from his judging righteousness in 1:18, but he also rightly recognizes the close connection between the two, namely as expressions of God's righteousness.⁴⁹ Both judgment and salvation are expressions of God's righteousness.

Scholars heavily debate what "the righteousness of God" means in the context of Romans. They offer varying accounts of the debate: righteousness as a divine attribute vs. a God-given status vs. a divine activity;⁵⁰ righteousness as transformative vs. forensic vs. God's covenantal faithfulness;⁵¹ and righteousness in an attributive sense vs. a communicative sense.⁵² The third classification by Longenecker is arguably the simplest, since it classifies positions as mediating between who God is and what God gives, which aligns well with Paul's statement of God as "just" and "justifier" in 3:26.⁵³ The righteousness attributed to God and the righteousness communicated by God both point back to God

⁴⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 83–84.

⁵⁰ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 73–100.

⁵¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 66–77.

⁵² Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 168–76.

⁵³ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 174.

himself. Whatever approach a reader favors, it is best to root “the righteousness of God” in the character of God himself before including other aspects.

Rom. 1:18-3:20 establishes God’s righteousness against humanity’s unrighteousness. First, in Rom. 1:18-32, Paul describes God’s righteousness in wrath against the unrighteousness of Gentiles.⁵⁴ Second, in Rom 2:1-3:8, Paul directs his critique towards the Jews, who also disobey the law despite knowing better.⁵⁵ Thirdly, in Rom 3:9-20, Paul culminates his description of God’s judging righteousness by confirming the unrighteousness of the whole world, including both Jew and Gentile.⁵⁶ Therefore, Rom. 3:9-20 concludes this section by affirming the absolute distinction between unrighteous humanity and the righteous God, which forms the fundamental problem of the epistle.

In view of God’s judging righteousness, Paul resolves the question of God’s saving righteousness with reference to Christ in 3:21-26. Schreiner argues that Paul turns from describing God’s judging righteousness to his saving righteousness in Christ’s atoning death.⁵⁷ Fitzmyer describes this as God’s “uprightness” revealed in Christ’s redemptive work and received by faith.⁵⁸ Therefore Paul makes a clear connection between God’s righteousness and Christ’s redemptive work.

⁵⁴ Schreiner, *Romans*, 87–88.

⁵⁵ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 136.

⁵⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 265; Schreiner, *Romans*, 171–72; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 220.

⁵⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, 186.

⁵⁸ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 341–42.

Trinitarian Relation: God's Transcendent Uniqueness

The soteriological theme of God's righteousness points to what Bauckham calls God's "transcendent uniqueness,"⁵⁹ a theme that Tilling applies to Paul's trinitarianism.⁶⁰ The connection between God's righteousness and his transcendent uniqueness features prominently throughout Rom. 1-3.⁶¹ One example is Rom. 3:19. Tilling notes that Paul's understanding of God's transcendent uniqueness includes his character and the expectation of human devotion to him,⁶² which Paul affirms by contrasting unrighteous humanity with the righteous God to whom humanity is accountable. Applied to Rom. 3:19, Paul describes humanity's violation of devotion to God in order to contrast the unrighteousness of humanity to the righteousness of God. This underscores God's transcendent uniqueness.

The language of theological/soteriological relations strengthens the connection between God's righteousness and his unique transcendence. As noted above, Longenecker describes the debate as whether God's righteousness is attributive (i.e. theological) or communicative (i.e. soteriological), ultimately concluding that Paul employs both senses at various points.⁶³ One need not choose to define "the righteousness of God" exclusively theologically or soteriologically, as God's own righteousness grounds his saving activity of declaring others righteous.⁶⁴ Furthermore, in Rom. 2:16 and 2:29, Paul includes Christ and the Spirit in descriptions of God's righteousness and one's standing before God, therefore

⁵⁹ Richard Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, 1st ed., ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics Series (Paternoster, 2004), 210–11.

⁶⁰ Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian."

⁶¹ Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian," 47–51.

⁶² Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian," 49–50.

⁶³ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 168–74.

⁶⁴ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 77.

including Christ and the Spirit in God's unique transcendence. Paul includes Christ and the Spirit in his explanation of God's righteousness from the beginning.

Therefore, God's righteousness in Rom. 1:17-3:26 shows his transcendent uniqueness as God. Paul belabors the absolute distinction between the righteous God and unrighteous humanity throughout this section, thus highlighting God's uniqueness and transcendence as the one God. Paul thereby sets the background for his inclusion of Christ and the Spirit in the transcendent uniqueness of God, both initially in Rom. 2:16 and 2:29 as well as later on in the trinitarian-soteriological progression. His next step is to explore the redemption of Christ.

The Redemption of Christ: Romans 3:21-7:6

In Rom. 3:21-7:6, Paul connects the righteousness of God to the redemption of Christ. The main soteriological theme is redemption. The trinitarian relation is the inclusion of Christ in God's unique transcendence. This activity and relation together advance the progression by demonstrating how God's righteousness is achieved through Christ's redemption.

Soteriological Progression: Righteousness through Redemption

The proximity of redemption in Christ and the righteousness of God in 3:21-26 supports redemption as marking a key point in the progression. Rom. 3:24 says that God's righteous justification comes "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (ESV). Scholars differ on what "redemption" means in 3:24, but many of them focus primarily on Christ's death, particularly due to the words "propitiation" and "blood" in the next verse.⁶⁵ Dunn, on the other hand, expands the concept by arguing that "the redemption which is in

⁶⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 197-98; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 250-52; Gaventa, *Romans*, 111-12.

Christ Jesus” indicates both a historical action and a present offer of union with Christ in both his death and resurrection.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Paul’s view of justification, which he connects with redemption and Christ’s death in 3:24-25, also includes the resurrection of Christ in 4:25.⁶⁷ Therefore Paul’s view of redemption in Christ includes his death and resurrection.

Although faith may seem more prominent in Rom. 4, from a theological perspective, the theme of human faith is soteriologically relevant yet less fundamental than God’s work in Christ.⁶⁸ Furthermore, from a textual perspective, Paul ties justifying faith to the more fundamental theme of Christ’s redemptive work in both 3:24 and 4:24-25,⁶⁹ which are situated on either end of the account of Abraham’s faith in Rom. 4. Therefore, Paul means to orient his readers’ understanding of faith towards Christ’s redemptive work.

Rom. 5 develops the benefits of Christ’s redemption. In 5:1-11, Paul continues his argument by noting the benefits imparted on believers through Christ’s death and resurrection, including peace with God and hope for the future.⁷⁰ In 5:12-21, Paul emphasizes the universal scope of these benefits by outlining how Christ’s redemptive work overcomes Adam’s disobedience.⁷¹ Paul’s conclusion in 5:21 emphasizes the connection between righteousness and life through Christ,⁷² which points to the importance of the resurrection for Christ’s redemption and God’s righteousness.

⁶⁶ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 179–80.

⁶⁷ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 315. Compare Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity,” 115–16.

⁶⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 203.

⁶⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 197, 203, 250–52.

⁷⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 259.

⁷¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 243.

⁷² Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 376.

Rom. 6:1-7:6 applies the redemptive work of Christ to the Christian life, which in turn prepares for Paul's description of the Spirit. Paul's argument focuses on how Christians have power to live righteously precisely because of their union with Christ's death and resurrection.⁷³ Moo sheds light on the thematic prominence of slavery and freedom, explaining how Paul sees Christ's death and resurrection as freeing people from the tyranny of sin to serve God.⁷⁴ In Rom. 7:1-6, Paul's employs the metaphor of death in marriage to illuminate how believers are freed from the law to serve Christ: they join him in his death and belong to him in his resurrection.⁷⁵ Therefore, based on this analysis of 3:21-7:6, Paul connects the righteousness of God to the redemption of Christ as the second movement in the trinitarian-soteriological progression.

Trinitarian Relation: God in Christ

Paul indicates that God reveals his righteousness through Christ's redemption, thus including Christ in God's unique transcendence. First, God's righteousness includes Christ's redemptive activity. Tilling argues that Paul articulates a divine Christology by expressing God's transcendent uniqueness not only in terms of God the Father, but also of the resurrected Christ.⁷⁶ God's transcendent uniqueness applies to Paul's view of Christ's redemption in 3:21-26 because Christ's redemption demonstrates God's own righteousness and enables humanity's justification. Because Paul holds God's righteousness as absolutely distinct from unrighteous humanity, Christ's redemption is only possible if Christ shares in the righteousness that characterizes God's transcendent uniqueness.

⁷³ Schreiner, *Romans*, 302-4.

⁷⁴ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 376-77.

⁷⁵ Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 368-69.

⁷⁶ Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian," 52.

Second, believers relate to God by their relation to Christ. According to Tilling, Paul's description of one's relation to Christ maps onto his description of one's relation to God.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Tilling argues that the relational existence of God, Christ, and the Spirit ("relational ontology") connects to our relational knowledge of God ("relational epistemology"), which suggests a connection between divine ontology and divine soteriological action.⁷⁸ Applied to Christ's redemption in Romans, only a divine view of Christ can properly account for how his redemptive work brings believers into right relationship with a righteous God. Campbell argues that Paul's view of "union with Christ" bespeaks an "implicit trinitarianism" because union with Christ immediately establishes a right relationship with the Father, thus noting both the unity and distinction between God and Christ.⁷⁹ In Paul's view, believers relate to God by their relation to Christ, which means Christ shares in the transcendent uniqueness of God. Therefore, based on Paul's inclusion of Christ in God's transcendent uniqueness, it is proper to ascribe divinity to Christ, allowing for both unity and distinction in his relation with God.

The Regeneration of the Spirit: Romans 7:6-8:39

In Rom. 7:6-8:39, Paul connects the righteousness of God and the redemption of Christ to the regeneration of the Spirit. The main soteriological theme is regeneration. The trinitarian relation is the inclusion of the Spirit in the transcendent uniqueness shared by God and Christ. Put together, these advance the progression by demonstrating how God's righteousness through Christ's redemption is completed in the Spirit's regeneration.

⁷⁷ Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian," 53.

⁷⁸ Tilling, "Paul, the Trinity, and Contemporary Trinitarian Debates," 41-42.

⁷⁹ Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 446-47.

Soteriological Progression: Regeneration from Righteousness and Redemption

The regeneration of the Spirit is the main soteriological activity of Rom. 7:6-8:39. Though “regeneration” is not a word Paul uses in Romans, the concept is present in Paul’s description of new life in the Spirit. Frame defines regeneration as “a sovereign act of God, beginning a new spiritual life in us.”⁸⁰ New life corresponds to Paul’s view of life in the Spirit, a theme that begins in 7:6 and continues developing in chapter 8.⁸¹ For these reasons, “regeneration” captures the Spirit’s life-giving activity in the third major movement of Paul’s trinitarian-soteriological progression.

The whole passage looks to life in the Spirit as the culmination of God’s saving work. Paul introduces new life in the Spirit as a result of Christ’s redemption in Rom. 7:6.⁸² Paul’s reasoning in Rom. 7:6-8:39 features a discussion of two conflicting elements: the problem of sin and the solution of the Spirit. In 7:22-25, Paul outlines the conflict between the mind that loves God’s law and the flesh which rejects God’s law. Schreiner observes how this struggle points to the believer’s need for the Spirit’s power.⁸³ Starting in Rom. 8:1-13, Paul poses a strong antithesis between the walk in the flesh that leads to death and the walk in the Spirit that leads to life.⁸⁴ The theme of adoption in 8:14-17 flows from the theme of life in the Spirit discussed in 8:1-13.⁸⁵ The theme of final glory for believers which bookends Rom. 8:18-30 ties together the themes of life and sonship by pointing forward to the final resurrection which will consummate eternal life, bring sonship to fruition, and reveal the

⁸⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 945.

⁸¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 448–49, 491–92.

⁸² Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Baker Academic, 1994), 508.

⁸³ Schreiner, *Romans*, 390.

⁸⁴ Ron C. Fay, *Father, Son, and Spirit in Romans 8: The Roman Reception of Paul’s Trinitarian Theology* (Fontes Press, 2020), 137.

⁸⁵ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 680.

glorious completion of God's redemptive plan.⁸⁶ Fay concisely connects these themes by saying, "The Spirit brings believers into glory because he functions as the agent of adoption."⁸⁷ All of these benefits flow from the Spirit's regeneration.

Paul not only explores the distinctive element of the Spirit's regeneration, but he also explains the unity of the Spirit's regeneration with Christ's redemption and God's righteousness in the soteriological progression. This is clearest in Rom. 8:9-11, where Paul connects God's action in resurrection with the work of Christ and the Spirit. Moo traces Paul's logic particularly in 8:10: the Spirit gives life to the believer on account of righteousness, which connects back to the description in 5:21 of righteousness and life given through Christ.⁸⁸ Paul ties it all together in 8:11 by saying that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to believers also by the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁸⁹ In short, Paul connects the redemptive resurrection of Christ to the regenerative work of the Spirit and ties both to the action of the righteous God.

Trinitarian Relation: God in Christ by the Spirit

Paul indicates that God applies his righteousness in Christ's redemption by the Spirit's regeneration, thus relating the Spirit to the shared unique transcendence of God and Christ. Paul's understanding of the Spirit is deeply intertwined with God and Christ. According to Hill, Paul demonstrates in 8:11 that the Spirit exists in a mutually identifying relationship with God and Christ.⁹⁰ Tilling explains that Christ's presence by the Spirit indicates the inclusion of the Spirit in Paul's divine Christology, which means Paul's

⁸⁶ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 530–32.

⁸⁷ Fay, *Father, Son, and Spirit in Romans 8: The Roman Reception of Paul's Trinitarian Theology*, 148.

⁸⁸ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 515.

⁸⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 409.

⁹⁰ Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters*, 163.

theological discourse includes God, Christ, and the Spirit together.⁹¹ Applied to Rom. 8, if Paul's argument includes the Spirit in the God and Christ relations, then it would be proper to describe Paul's view as trinitarian.

The relational unity of God, Christ, and the Spirit is strongly demonstrated by Rom. 8:9. Paul identifies the Spirit as both "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ." Moo identifies this close association as "practical trinitarianism."⁹² Schreiner points to this text as contributing to later developments in the doctrine of the Trinity.⁹³ Therefore, Paul offers strong support in Rom. 8:9 for trinitarian relations between God, Christ, and the Spirit.

As the heart of the richest trinitarian passage in the New Testament,⁹⁴ Rom. 8:11 in particular poses a significant challenge to those cautious towards trinitarianism in Paul. For example, according to Dunn, Paul makes stronger distinctions between God, Christ, and the Spirit theologically despite their soteriological unity in order to keep Christology within Jewish monotheism.⁹⁵ Watson better accounts for this by arguing that the divine agent is known through these divine actions.⁹⁶ God reveals his righteous character by giving redemptive life in Christ through the regenerating Holy Spirit. The Spirit is thus included in the transcendent uniqueness of God and applies the righteousness of God and the redemption of Christ to the believer through regeneration.

Implications for Further Reflection

The findings of this study raise several considerations for future reflection. First, this study adds to the growing consensus that the doctrine of the Trinity is a subject not

⁹¹ Tilling, "Paul the Trinitarian," 55.

⁹² Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 513.

⁹³ Schreiner, *Romans*, 408.

⁹⁴ Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Wipf and Stock, 2002), 44.

⁹⁵ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 265, 293.

⁹⁶ Watson, "The Triune Divine Identity," 104–5.

only for systematic theology, but also for biblical theology. The historical bifurcation of biblical theology and systematic theology led to the classification of the Trinity as distinctly systematic.⁹⁷ The tide has turned with the publication of studies on trinitarianism within particular books of the New Testament.⁹⁸ Swimming with this tide, this study demonstrates that the Trinity is not just a theological entailment, but a biblical-theological feature of the literary structure of Rom. 1-8.

Second, this study warrants the study of other theological loci in Paul's trinitarian progression in Rom. 1-8. An example is the theme of salvation history. In Rom. 1-8, Paul occasionally employs the phrase "but now" to emphasize the shift in salvation history from the old age to the new age,⁹⁹ and two of those instances (Rom. 3:21 and Rom. 7:6) occur at major transition points in Paul's trinitarian progression. The application of Paul's trinitarianism to salvation history was left largely unexplored in this paper, but it is a vital area for continued development.

Finally, this study is a reminder that the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the very heart of the Christian life.. Throughout Rom. 1-8, and especially in Rom. 8:11, Paul offers a wide-sweeping survey of the gospel that depends on the one God eternally existing in three coequal persons, working distinctly yet inseparably to save sinners. The Christian's life is shaped by communion with this Triune God.

⁹⁷ Andrew K Gabriel, "Pauline Pneumatology and the Question of Trinitarian Presuppositions," in *Paul and His Theology*, ed. Stanley Porter, Pauline Studies (Brill, 2006), 347.

⁹⁸ David W Congdon, "The Trinitarian Shape of Πίστις: A Theological Exegesis of Galatians," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2, no. 2 (2008): 231–58; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 24 (Apollos, 2008); Brandon D. Smith, *The Trinity in the Book of Revelation: Seeing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in John's Apocalypse*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (IVP Academic, 2022); Brandon D. Smith, ed., *The Trinity in the Canon: A Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Practical Proposal* (B&H Publishing Group, 2023); Garrett S Craig, "The Divine Identity in 1 Peter: The Father, Christ, and the Spirit in Relation," *Themelios* 49, no. 1 (2024): 73–85.

⁹⁹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 241, 445–47.

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