
Third Article Theology

Nearing his death in 1968, Karl Barth commented that his theological work could be replicated and complemented by a Third Article Theology: a theology that interprets reality through the lens of the Spirit. He wrote:

What I have already intimated here and there to good friends, would be the possibility of a theology of the third article, in other words, a theology predominantly and decisively of the Holy Spirit. Everything which needs to be said, considered and believed about God the Father and God the Son in an understanding of the first and second articles might be shown and illuminated in its foundations through God the Holy Spirit.¹

Interestingly, Barth did not think the time for pursuing such a Third Article Theology was ripe, arguing that it was “still too difficult to distinguish between God’s Spirit and man’s spirit.” He suggested that after the turn of the century a genuine Third Article Theology

1. Karl Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” in *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. D. Ritschl (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 278.

could begin to emerge.² This “prediction” has proved remarkably astute, as for the last several years theologians from many different traditions—Roman Catholic (Ralph Del Colle, David Coffey), Protestant (Lyle Dabney, Gary Badcock, Clark Pinnock, Myk Habets), and ecumenical (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Amos Yong, Steven Studebaker)—have begun to move in this direction. While differences of approach exist,³ the common conviction underlying this research stream is that pneumatology comes first. Third Article theologians specifically and intentionally examine theology through the lens of the Spirit.

1.1 What Is Third Article Theology?

What does it mean to start with the Spirit? Proponents of Third Article Theology most often describe this theological method by contrasting it with other approaches. While such contrasting descriptions are illustrative, Third Article Theology should primarily be understood as an important and necessary subset of the Trinitarian renaissance that has fueled much of twentieth-century theology.

First, Second, and Third Article Theologies

The United Methodist theologian D. Lyle Dabney characterizes Third Article Theology by contrasting it with two alternative theological strategies that have dominated western Christian thought, namely First and Second Article theologies.⁴ His comparisons are

2. Karl Barth, *Karl Barth's Table Talk* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), 28.

3. Differences include whether the specific terminology of a “theology of the third article” or a “Third Article Theology” is adopted or not. Note also that many authors, including Barth, use the two phrases interchangeably. This research will make a distinction between them, as described in section 1.3 below.

4. The following subsection is based on D. Lyle Dabney, “Why Should the First Be Last? The Priority of Pneumatology in Recent Theological Discussion,” in *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and D. Lyle Dabney (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 240–61. See also D. Lyle Dabney, “Starting

helpful if seen as broad generalizations rather than detailed historical critiques.

The first article of the Apostles' Creed states "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."⁵ So, First Article theologies start with the Father. Using this lens, the focus is initially on God's creation—our innate God-given abilities and capabilities—and traces a continuous path from nature through to grace. First Article theologies understand that there is a universal, inbuilt, human capacity for and tendency toward God. So grace fills out and purifies what is already in us and in all of creation—that which has been tarnished and diminished by sin—and brings it to perfection and completion. All of our reality—our humanity, our salvation, our relationships, our future—is interpreted and understood through this continuity. First Article theologies are most clearly evidenced in medieval scholasticism. Exemplars include Thomas Aquinas ("Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it")⁶ and perhaps even Augustine ("You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you").⁷

The second article of the Apostles' Creed states "And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord."⁸ Second Article theologies thus start with the Son, and view reality through the lens of Christ and his redemptive work. In contrast to First Article theologies, which operate from the initial orientation of Patrology, Second Article theologies have a Christological orientation. So rather than starting

with the Spirit: Why the Last Should Now Be First," in *Starting with the Spirit*, ed. Stephen Pickard and Gordon Preece (Hindmarsh: Australian Theological Forum, 2001), 3–27; and D. Lyle Dabney, "Saul's Armour: The Problem and Promise of Pentecostal Theology," *Pneuma* 23, no. 1 (2001): 126–31.

5. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition: Early, Eastern and Medieval* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 669.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 13.

7. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. E. M. Blaiklock (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), 15.

8. Pelikan and Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeks and Confessions: Early, Eastern and Medieval*, 669.

with our openness to God as his creation, they focus on our universal rejection of God as sinners. Rather than tracing a continuous route from nature through to grace, they focus on the darkly impenetrable divide between humanity and God. Rather than concentrating on created humanity gradually making its way up to God, they center on a God who miraculously makes his way down to fallen humanity. For Second Article theologies, all of our reality is interpreted not through continuity but through discontinuity—through contrast and contradiction. God is completely pure; humanity completely depraved. God is totally powerful; humanity totally impotent. Second Article theologies are most clearly evident in the work of the Protestant Reformation. Exemplars include Luther (“on the part of man however nothing precedes grace except ill will and even rebellion against grace”)⁹ and perhaps even Barth himself, who clearly considers each theological doctrine from a Christological perspective. (“We see [Christ], and in this mirror we see ourselves, ourselves as those who commit sin and are sinners. We are here inescapably accused and irrevocably condemned.”)¹⁰

The third article of the Apostles’ Creed states “Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.”¹¹ Third Article Theology operates from the initial orientation of pneumatology, and thus views reality through the lens of the Spirit and his transformative work. First and Second Article theologies focus respectively on our *universal* tendency toward or *universal* rejection of God. Third Article theologies focus on the *particular*—the specific reality of the Spirit in communities and relationships. And even more particularly they focus on one relationship—the Spirit’s presence in Jesus Christ. Third

9. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, trans. H. J. Grimm, vol. 31 of 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 11.

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), IV/1, 390.

11. Pelikan and Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeks and Confessions: Early, Eastern and Medieval*, 669.

Article theologies do not start from the continuity or discontinuity between humanity and divinity, but rather with the reality of *transformation*. Hence they balance and affirm both the continuity and discontinuity of nature with grace, of time with eternity, and ultimately of humanity with divinity. And arising from this basis of *particularity* and *transformation*, Third Article theologies search for an “emergent common,” a *relational* reality as we are drawn together to God. For First Article theologies the key concept is *the beatific vision*—the perfection and completion of humanity. For Second Article theologies the key concept is *justification*—the restoring of a right standing. But for Third Article theologies, the key concept is *participation*—the drawing of individuals and communities into the life of God.

There is no claim that a Third Article Theology and its associated methodological commitment are entirely novel or unique. Irenaeus in the patristic period,¹² John Owen¹³ or Jonathan Edwards¹⁴ after the Reformation, or Edward Irving in the Enlightenment¹⁵ are just a small sample of those who developed components of a Third Article Theology. Moreover, theologians who focus primarily on other approaches certainly do not neglect pneumatology, often using the

12. See for example Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
13. See for example K. M. Kopic, “The Spirit as Gift: Explorations in John Owen’s Pneumatology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. K. M. Kopic and M. Jones (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 113–40; Alan Spence, “The Significance of John Owen for Modern Christology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. K. M. Kopic and M. Jones (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012); and Colin Gunton, “John Owen and John Zizioulas on the Church,” in *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays (1972-1995)* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 187–205.
14. See for example Myk Habets, “The Surprising Third Article Theology of Jonathan Edwards,” in *The Ecumenical Edwards: Jonathan Edwards and the Theologians*, ed. Kyle Strobel (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, forthcoming), np.
15. See for example Colin Gunton, “Two Dogma’s Revisited: Edward Irving’s Christology,” in *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays (1972-1995)* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 151–68.

lens of the Spirit to complement and balance the views they gain in developing First or Second Article theologies.¹⁶ Medieval scholarship is not entirely based on the first article, nor is Reformation theology entirely based on the second. Further, there is no implication that Third Article theologies should *replace* First and Second Article theologies. The methodological portraits above should be seen as stylized caricatures, not detailed, historically accurate photographs.¹⁷ Nevertheless the claim of those promoting Third Article theologies is that the lens of the Spirit as a theological starting point provides a profound perspective that has not been comprehensively pursued with depth and rigor. “Such a theology of the third article is still truly in its infancy,” writes Amos Yong, one prominent advocate of this perspective.¹⁸ Although it has been hinted at, the development of a thorough, complete, and systematic Third Article Theology still lies in front of Christian endeavor. It promises a significant and valuable complement to the already well-developed First and Second Article theologies.

Theologies from Above and Below

A second contrast distinguishing Third Article Theology from other approaches is that it is a theology “from below” and not “from above.” Unlike many other methodologies, Third Article Theology makes Spirit-enabled functionality its starting point rather than Trinitarian ontology. It focuses first on the Spirit-empowered works of God

16. So, both Augustine and Barth for example (used above as exemplars of First and Second Article theologies) certainly had robust pneumatologies.

17. Regarding the challenges of applying a “Kuhnian” paradigmatic approach in a complex theological and cultural landscape, see Martin Sutherland, “Pine Trees and Paradigms: Rethinking Mission in the West,” in *Mission Without Christendom: Exploring the Site*, ed. Martin Sutherland (Auckland: Carey Baptist College, 2000), 132–36. Sutherland’s work applies particularly to missiological categories, but has broader relevance.

18. Amos Yong, “Introduction: Pentecostalism and a Theology of the Third Article,” in *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission*, ed. Amos Yong (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), xvii.

rather than the internal makeup of his being. It starts from below and works upwards, rather than starting from above and working downwards. Although Barth's work exemplified a top-down approach, he recognized and endorsed this alternative method of doing theology:

There is certainly a place for legitimate Christian thinking starting from below and moving up, from man who is taken hold of by God to God who takes hold of man . . . one might well understand it as a theology of the third article. . . . Starting from below, as it were, with Christian man, it could and should have struggled its way upward to an authentic explication of the Christian faith.¹⁹

In this movement from below to above, our theological reflection matches our discipleship. As we are drawn by the Spirit from our current fallen state into participation in the Godhead, so our theological reflections start from our current experience and knowledge (limited and tainted by creaturely mortality and sinfulness) and move upwards toward reflections on the nature and existence of God. So for example, in developing a Third Article Christology (or Spirit Christology), theologians start from Jesus' Spirit-empowered actions and move upwards from there to consider his divine status.

Two important clarifications are required. First, a key feature of Third Article theologies is the assumption of movement. Although the starting point for Third Article theologies is from *below*, this is merely a starting point *from* which movement occurs. The intent is to move upwards. As Gunton has written specifically of a Christology from below, "[T]here is every intention and indeed expectation to leave the ground, to speak theologically as well as anthropologically, and not to remain stranded on the earth."²⁰ Second, Third Article

19. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1972), 24–25.

theologies, as theologies from below, are intended to complement and not replace theological methods that start from above. While some argue for such replacement,²¹ and others contend that theologies from below are preferable or prior to top-down alternatives,²² this research argues that the two approaches are complementary. Third Article Theology fills out and corrects some of the over- or underemphases, the intractabilities, and particularly the dichotomies of other theological methodologies. As Dabney writes, a Third Article Theology may “bring together what we have so often let slip apart: worship and theology, service to God and service to God’s world, the honouring of God’s creation and the proclamation of God’s redemption.”²³ With its triple emphases of particularity, transformation, and relationship, starting with the Spirit holds great promise for theological insight.

Trinitarian Theology

More than the perceived inadequacies of other theological approaches, though, Third Article Theology finds its positive justification and impetus as a subset of the twentieth century’s Trinitarian renaissance. Stanley Grenz, writing in 2004, comments that “whenever the story of the last hundred years is told, the rediscovery of the Trinity that sprouted and then came to full bloom during the eight decades following the First World War must be given center stage, and the rebirth of Trinitarian theology must be presented as one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century.”²⁴ This renewed interest has extended well beyond

20. Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1983), 11.

21. For example those Spirit Christologies that attempt to replace Logos Christology. See section 2.1 for further discussion of such proposals.

22. See for example Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 50–51. This aspect of priority is commented on further in section 1.3 below.

23. Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit,” 27.

an investigation of the Trinity as a lone subject, to the impact that these newly derived or rediscovered Trinitarian understandings have on other theological doctrines. As Gunton famously remarked, “In the light of the theology of the Trinity, everything looks different.”²⁵ Significant numbers of theologians are following the Trinitarian renaissance by reexamining soteriology, ecclesiology, Christology, and other theological aspects through interpretational grids developed from a Trinitarian starting point.

One pertinent insight that has emerged from this explosion of interest in the Trinity is the relative underemphasis historically on pneumatology—an oversight that is rapidly being redressed. McGrath’s often-quoted witticism is that “the Holy Spirit has long been the Cinderella of the Trinity. The other two sisters may have gone to the theological ball; the Holy Spirit got left behind every time. But not now.”²⁶ Yong comments similarly that “the resurgence of thinking about the Holy Spirit, long recognized as the shy, silent, or even forgotten member of the Trinity—has been underway at least since the middle of the twentieth century.”²⁷ But just as a renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity led to a viewing of other theological loci through a Trinitarian lens, a renewed interest in pneumatology has led to the similar desire to view other theological loci through the lens of the Spirit. While such an approach fits within the subset of broader Trinitarian approaches to theology, it has shown

24. Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1. Not all see the direction this Trinitarian renaissance has taken as positive, however. See for example Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 1–32, 198–200.

25. Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 7.

26. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 279. The nomenclature of the Spirit as a Trinitarian Cinderella can be traced back to (at least) G. J. Sirks, “The Cinderella of Theology: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” *Harvard Theological Review* 50, no. 2 (1957): 77–89.

27. Yong, “Introduction,” xvi.

great potential for theological insight. As Dabney argues, “Christian theology has never come to grips with the fact that relationship to God through Jesus Christ starts with the Spirit. There may have been good reasons for that in the past. But now, a host of voices suggest, there are good reasons for beginning our theologizing where we begin our discipleship.”²⁸ The discussion turns now to a brief explication of these reasons.

1.2 Why Should We Pursue a Third Article Theology?

What is to be gained by starting from the Spirit? What imperatives imply that starting with the Spirit will complement other more established theological approaches and yield valuable theological insight? The following discussion briefly considers five overlapping imperatives that point to Third Article Theology as an appropriate and timely theological method.

The Biblical Imperative

The first imperative is biblical. God’s word reveals the Spirit as God’s transcendent immanence. God is present to us by his Spirit in an immediate and not mediated sense.²⁹ This recognition allows us, and even encourages us to view God’s other activity in the world as an aspect of the Spirit’s mission, rather than the Spirit as an aspect of God’s other activity. So, for example, the fact that the Bible speaks of the incarnation being facilitated through the Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20) leads naturally to seeing the Son’s mission as an aspect of the Spirit’s, rather than the reverse.³⁰ The realization that God regularly initiates

28. Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit,” 27.

29. See for example Steven M. Studebaker, *The Trinitarian Vision of Jonathan Edwards and David Coffey* (New York: Cambria, 2011), 164–65.

30. See particularly Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 80.

his action in the world through the Spirit suggests a theological approach that views God's work in the world through a pneumatological lens.

There are multiple biblical examples of God initiating his action through the Spirit. In creation, even before the word of God was spoken, the Spirit hovered over the waters (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit or breath of God is viewed as both life's animator (Gen. 2:7; Job 27:3) and its *re*-animator (Ezek. 37:1-14). The nation of Israel was established through the Spirit (Exod. 15:8, 10; Isa. 63:11-14), and her prophets, priests, and kings were chosen and empowered through the Spirit (Zech. 7:11-12; 2 Chron. 24:20; 1 Sam. 16:13-14). Turning to the New Testament, Jesus' birth was facilitated by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), his ministry was initiated by the Spirit (Mark 1:9-12), he was led to the cross by the Spirit (Heb. 9:14), and he was resurrected by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 1:4). The church similarly was born of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-41). Indeed, all of our Christian life is enabled by the Spirit: our conversion (John 3:5-8), our prayers (Jude 21), and our final resurrection (Rom. 8:11). The Spirit is the firstfruits of God's life in us and our life in him (2 Cor. 1:22). Even the very Bible that conveys these truths was inspired by the Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Given that God, according to the clear biblical witness, so often initiates his work through the Spirit, there is motivation for adopting a theological approach that reflects this revealed reality—an approach that intentionally views God's activity through the lens of the Spirit. There is, of course, no definitive, logical link from "God works this way" to "We should learn of God this way." But it is nevertheless suggestive. At the very least it implies that a theological methodology that starts with the Spirit is congruent with Scripture and is well worth pursuing.

The Theological Imperative

A second imperative is theological. It is through the Spirit that we are united to Christ and increasingly conform to his image. By starting with the Spirit, then, our theological method matches our discipleship.

Analyzing the Spirit is difficult. “Understanding is often more incomplete and confused here than with most of the other doctrines.”³¹ There is less explicit revelation in the Bible concerning the Spirit than the other two persons of the Godhead.³² While the Father and the Son have images enabling us to conceptualize them (however inaccurately), the Spirit is intangible and difficult to apprehend. When we turn from looking *at* the Spirit to looking *through* the Spirit, however, the picture quality changes dramatically.³³ It is only *through the Spirit* that we are convicted of our sinfulness (John 16:8–11), recognize Jesus as the Son of God (John 15:26), or approach the Father (Rom. 8:14–17; Eph. 2:18). It is *through the Spirit*, however implicitly, that we know about God and approach him in relationship. The suggestion of Third Article Theology, then, is that we make explicit what is implicit; that we intentionally begin our theological examinations by looking *through the Spirit*. In this way our theological method matches our reality, our experience, and our discipleship.

The image of the Spirit as a lens is helpful here. When we look *at* a lens—particularly a high-quality lens—it is transparent and difficult to focus on. When we look *through* a lens, the object in view comes

31. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 846–47.

32. *Ibid.*, 847. See also Killian McDonnell, “The Determinative Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” *Theology Today* 39, no. 2 (1982): 142–45.

33. This echoes a distinction made by C. S. Lewis of looking *along* something rather than merely looking *at* it. See C. S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” in *Compelling Reason: Essays on Ethics and Theology*, ed. W. Hooper (London: Fount, 1998), 52–55.

into perspective. Third Article theologies aim to use the Spirit as a God-given lens through which we can conduct theological inquiry. As Bobrinskoy writes, “Pneumatology is not so much one specific chapter of Christian theology as an essential dimension of every theological view of the church and of its spirituality and liturgical and sacramental life.”³⁴ Third Article theologies thus explicitly aim to allow the Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

The Philosophical Imperative

A third imperative is philosophical. The nature of created reality is irreducibly plural, and hence our theological examinations will benefit from starting with the relational category of Spirit.³⁵

According to Steven Smith, twentieth-century philosophy has moved past classical ontology (which starts with the abstract concept of existence) and postfoundationalism (which starts with the limits of human capacity) and now begins its examination of reality through the medium of language and speech.³⁶ But language and speech are essentially interpersonal. Relationship undergirds and intrinsically indwells language. So before anything else, claims Smith, relationship must be the starting point of any examination of reality. But, as theologian Michael Welker notes, accepting this starting point of relationship and the irreducible plurality of our reality inevitably brings pneumatology to theology’s forefront³⁷ because it is through the Spirit that we relate to God and others. Pneumatology thus becomes the primary lens through which we examine reality. As

34. Boris Bobrinskoy, “Holy Spirit,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 470.

35. See Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit,” 5–11.

36. See Steven G. Smith, *The Concept of the Spiritual: An Essay in First Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), particularly pp. 3–5.

37. See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. J. F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), particularly pp. ix–xiii. Note that it is the Holy Spirit and not a generalized notion of human spirit that is being referred to here. These two concepts need to be carefully distinguished.

Killian McDonnell writes, “Pneumatology is to theology what epistemology is to philosophy. Pneumatology determines the ‘rules’ for speaking about God.”³⁸

The Cultural Imperative

A fourth imperative is cultural. Third Article Theology, with its emphases on particularity and relationality, has significant potential to speak with relevance to contemporary western society in a way that can be heard.

Although the claims of cataclysmic shifts in cultural perception are exaggerated, there is nevertheless genuine validity in the notion of postmodernism. The way people view and understand the world around them has altered. Historical “givens” such as human rationality and the inevitability of progress are increasingly questioned. But if there is scant acknowledgment of human rationality or any Godward tendency in today’s world, the potential for a First Article Theology to be heard is significantly diminished. Similarly, the claims of Second Article Theology can sound negative, and appear, at least initially, to offer little hope in a world that is already broadly acknowledged as chaotic and disintegrating. These theological approaches, quite appropriate to their time, have decreasing connection with a postmodern mindset.

In contrast, the themes of Third Article Theology—particularity, relationality, transformation—closely align with the leitmotifs of postmodernism. Good theology will always teach the church how to proclaim and live the truths we believe in a manner that is appropriate and understandable to our age. In a world that has rejected the

38. Killian McDonnell, “A Response to D. Lyle Dabney,” in *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and D. Lyle Dabney (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 264. See also Killian McDonnell, “A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit,” *Theological Studies* 46, no. 2 (1985): 214–18.

universal for the particular, Third Article Theology begins with the localized claim that in *this* people, at *this* time, the Spirit is present and drawing us as a community toward redemption with God. In a world that values community,³⁹ a Third Article Theology begins with the Spirit that draws us *together* to God. In a world where good and evil dwell side by side, a Third Article Theology that focuses on neither universal continuity nor discontinuity can “enable the Christian community both to socially and intellectually affirm some and yet contradict other aspects of the age we live.”⁴⁰ Through its theme of transformation it can speak hope to a world whose fundamental fabric is threatening to unravel.

The Ecumenical Imperative

A fifth imperative is ecumenical. A Third Article Theology has the potential to speak with relevance not just to contemporary society but also to the current church. Naturally, no single methodology will result in practical catholicity, but if hopes are realized, starting with the Spirit will provide an approach that begins to cross theological spectra and draws diverging groups together.⁴¹

If the world is changing, the church is changing too. First, Christianity’s influence is rapidly declining as Christendom “collapses.” Religion is increasingly privatized and Christianity is just one choice among many. Second, the sociological and historical barriers that separate us from our Christian brothers and sisters are diminishing. In many cases, the major remaining causes of division between distinctive Christian groupings are theological dichotomies

39. Even if that community is a pale imitation of true Christian communion.

40. Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit,” 25–26.

41. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 65–79. This article outlines ways the ecumenical imperative is being fulfilled through Third Article Theology.

that the vast majority even within those groups neither recognize nor understand. Third, and most significantly, Christianity has spread globally. The western missionary endeavor, for all its failings, has been immensely successful. Christianity exists and thrives in an increasingly vast variety of contexts. Furthermore, not just the sociological and historical barriers, but the practical barriers of distance and communication with other believers are diminishing.

In this changing context, what is needed is an ecumenical way of doing theology—a methodology that stretches wide to embrace different aspects of Christian diversity, drawing them into an emerging and common doctrinal unity.⁴² Third Article Theologians claim there are several reasons to be hopeful that starting with the Spirit has ecumenical potential. First, pneumatology as a relatively unexamined theological subject allows Christian groups a new meeting place for dialogue, which can be approached without too many preconceived opinions and agendas.⁴³ Second, the starting point of particularity as opposed to universality enables the contextual distinctiveness of each position and community to be acknowledged up front, while also affirming the common reality of the Spirit in each particular expression. Third, there is hope that the both/and approach of Third Article Theology (rather than Second Article Theology's emphasis on discontinuities) will enable new ways to resolve or minimize longstanding internal disputes and dichotomies. Fourth, a Third Article Theology may be able to redefine what ecumenism means altogether, enabling a meaningful "unity within diversity" framework applied not just to individuals within local churches but to groups and traditions within the global Christian community.

42. For a lucid summary of the aims and limitations of an ecumenical theology see George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–18. Particularly insightful is the list of seven guidelines, pp. 9–10.

43. See for example Philip J. Rosato, "Called by God, in the Holy Spirit: Pneumatological Insights into Ecumenism," *Ecumenical Review* 30, no. 2 (1978): 110–26, particularly pp. 110–11.

Fifth, Third Article Theology as a method invites, and in many ways requires, a strong integration of spirituality and intellectualism.⁴⁴ Given that the Spirit has always been understood as the binding factor, not just within the Trinity but historically within the church, it does not seem a vain hope that by starting with the Spirit we may find means to develop an emerging commonality not just in our thinking, but in our practice.

1.3 How Do We Do Third Article Theology?

How does starting with the Spirit actually work? Third Article Theology as a phrase is used in two senses: first as a specific theological *method* that starts with the Spirit, and second as the theological *understanding* that emerges when this method is adopted. Focusing particularly on the former sense, Third Article Theology locates itself within the broader stream of Trinitarian methodologies. But how does one go about following such a methodology? In particular, how is Third Article Theology distinguished from other approaches? Extending the work of Dabney, Habets has developed a set of ten methodological criteria that characterize Third Article Theology. What follows is my own theological articulation of these ten points.⁴⁵

1. It starts with the Holy Spirit. Pneumatological considerations are not left to a postscript or conclusion but are, rather, incorporated into theological discourse right from the beginning.

44. See for example Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology*, 78–79.

45. These were listed most comprehensively in Habets, “The Surprising Third Article Theology of Jonathan Edwards,” n.p. (Note that Habets’s article lists the criteria without further explanation, although [as noted in the detailed explanations below] he has more detail in other published work.) Criteria 1, 6, 7, and 10 are sourced from Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit,” 24–27. Criteria 3 and 8 have been independently suggested by Andrew Grosso, “Spirit Christology and the Shape of the Theological Enterprise,” in *A Man of the Church: Honoring the Theology, Life, and Witness of Ralph Del Colle*, ed. Michel René Barnes (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 206–22.