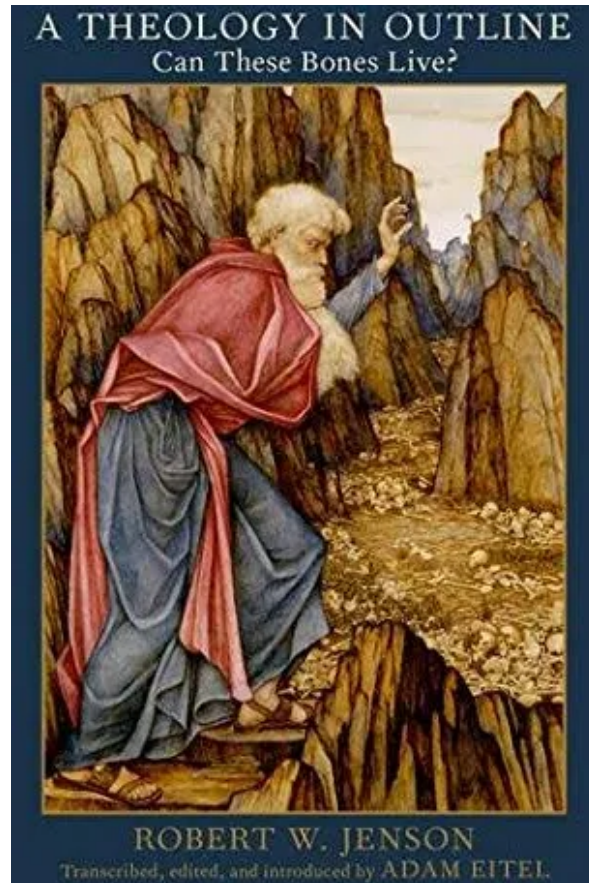


# A Review of Robert Jenson's A Theology in Outline



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## Co-missioners,

This week Bruce Modahl reviews a little book by one of the most prominent American Lutheran theologians of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As Bruce suggests, it might prompt some interesting and profitable discussion in the circles you think and pray with. At its heart is a question that all of us are bound to ask this Lent: how can we help our 21<sup>st</sup> century neighbors hear the story of Jesus' death and resurrection as

Good News for them?

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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**A Review: Robert W Jenson's *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live***

Transcribed, edited, and introduced by Adam Eitel; Oxford  
University Press, 2016.

by Bruce Modahl

*Can These Bones Live?* is a lightly edited verbatim of Robert Jenson's lectures to an undergraduate class at Princeton University. The lectures were transcribed from audio recordings. Jenson and the editor, Adam Eitel, divided the material into chapters. Omitted from the book are the conversations Jenson had with students during the lectures.

Jenson wrote in his preface that his goal was to give his students a taste of Christian theology, "that unaccustomed food, in hopes that they might find it savory."

With only 128 pages, the book is filled with savory food. It is accessible not only to theologians and pastors but also, with a little guidance, to layfolk. The book could easily be used in an adult class.

The question God proposes to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" propels Jenson's lectures and therefore this book. In this post-Christian era, can the story of God living with his people continue? Throughout the book, Jenson uses the language of narrative, plot, and drama to describe God as the life lived

between Father and Son in the Spirit. The plot and drama thicken to include those who live in Christ. Jenson sets the stage in chapter 1:

Is the gospel—the church’s message that death does not win because it does not win with Jesus—is that message still tenable? Is Christian theology itself a pile of dried-up bones? Does it still make sense to say that someone has risen from the dead? And if it does, did it in fact happen? And even if a first-century Galilean rabbi did rise from the dead, so what? ... Can we give answers to these questions that are actually intelligible to twenty-first-century denizens of the modern West? Well, can these bones live?

Jenson proceeds through the standard topics one finds in systematic theology: the Trinity, ecclesiology, the image of God, and so forth. This book, however, is not a Cliffs Notes version of his two-volume *Systematic Theology*. Eitel describes it as “an itinerary for doing theology.”



The Trinity by Andrei Rublev  
from [Wikipedia](#)

In one of the book's best chapters, "The Triune God," Jenson calls the doctrine of the Trinity Christianity's "big, difficult thing." He works through it in a few pages, beginning at the time it arose as controversy in the church, around AD 150. He explains how the Hellenistic world influenced the debate. In clear and concise language, he describes the development of the doctrine. He traces it from the Apologists of the second century to Origen, on to Arius, the Council of Nicaea called by Emperor Constantine in 325, and the second great Council of Constantinople in 381. He explains the parts played by Athanasius and the Cappadocians.

Jenson concludes, "[T]he whole doctrine of the Trinity can be explained by simply remarking that Christians pray to the Father, with the Son, in the Spirit, and are convinced that by so doing they are properly caught up in the story that God lives with his people."

Another of the book's highlights is its chapter on the atonement. If we divide the word into its syllables—at-one-ment—we know it means putting together things that should not have been separated in the first place. In this instance what should not have been separated is God and us.

To explain what did the separating, Jenson delves into what he calls the “unpopular subject of sin.” The commandments point us to the good life God intends for us. The good life is lived in community with him and with one another. Sin is whatever breaks up the community.

At the cross and empty grave, God puts back together what should not have been separated. Jesus' cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” completes the rupture between God and humanity. When God raised Jesus from the grave, he restored the unity between God and humankind.

Just how the resurrection of this one man could bring about atonement between God and humanity is explained in a number of ways. Jenson deftly describes ideas that developed in the Orthodox churches in the East. He charts the theories put forth in the western church by Anselm and Abelard. He ends the chapter with what he says is “a more plausible theory that more nearly approximates the drama that climaxes in the New Testament.” He draws on both Martin Luther and Hans Urs von Balthasar, as well as on the term *justification*. Jenson asks, “How does God restore or ‘at-one’ the community ruptured by sin?” He answers,

It is not by our “works.” Rather, what unites us with God is “faith,” which is nothing but our trust, in what happens in Christ. It is precisely this faith and only this faith, this trust, that attaches our lives to the divine drama, which is a drama that God lives *for us*. That, I think, is how the death and

resurrection of Jesus comes to make a difference in our lives.

In his chapter on the image of God, Jenson leads us into the weeds a bit with a discussion of human nature in terms of our essential identity—what humanity has in common—and our personal identity—those traits which describe each person. According to Jenson, Christian theology says that what we have in common “is not in the first place an essence or nature. What we have in common is the story in which we appear.” We are created to be conversation partners with God. That is at the heart of what it means to be created in God’s image.



Photo by [Sharon Santema](#)  
on [Unsplash](#)

At the end of this chapter it becomes clear why it was necessary for Jenson to give priority to personal identity. He says the personal identities Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “are constituted in each one’s relationship to the other two.” He continues with a most remarkable claim: that “one of those three is one of us; our life together has a structure determined by

the structure of the divine life. We have something in common by which we hold together, through which we can come together.” He repeats this claim in the last chapter of the book.

Here Jenson reminds me of Robert Bertram. In lectures on the passion account in John, Bertram pointed out that Jesus did not return to God in the same form by which he came. Jesus ascended into heaven as one of us. He was buried a physical body; he was raised a spiritual body. But it was still a body, said Bertram. There is one of us in the Trinity.

The minor quibbles I have with Jenson’s lectures only heighten my desire to hear more from him. That more will have to await the end of the drama God has plotted for his people.

Robert W. Jenson died in 2017 at the age of 87. Prior to retirement, he was the scholar for research at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. He taught Christian theology at Luther College, Gettysburg Seminary, St. Olaf College, Oxford University, and Princeton University.

The editor of the book, Adam Eitel, is an assistant professor of ethics at Yale Divinity School.



Robert W. Jenson

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
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