



Holmes, Stephen R.

The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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There's been a steady stream of books published on the doctrine of the Trinity over the last few decades. Many of them tell the same story about the "recovering" or "rediscovery" of the doctrine, which had allegedly been "lost" or "forgotten." We're often told that since Karl Barth and Karl Rahner there has been a "renaissance" of Trinitarian theology. Recent works (e.g., the multi-authored *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*) have rightly challenged this notion by pointing out that the Trinity has never ceased to be a topic for reflection among theologians in any era.

Stephen R. Holmes (senior lecturer in systematic theology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland) adds his voice to the discussion in *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity*. The subtitle confuses the order that Holmes follows throughout this volume. He begins by examining the so-called trinitarian revival of the 21st century and finally ends up in the same place. All the usual suspects are mentioned (e.g., Pannenberg; Jenson; Moltmann; Zizioulas; et al.) and he even takes some time to highlight the work of analytic philosophers of religion like Brian Leftow; Michael Rea; and Cornelius Plantinga. But whatever it is that these folks are doing, it isn't reviving the doctrine of the Trinity; at least not the classic doctrine of the Trinity.

The remainder of the book takes up a historical recounting of the major events and ideas involved in Trinitarian theologizing from the Patristic era all the way up through the modern era. This involves outlining the major debates; challenging Théodore de Régnon's paradigm, which suggested a vast difference between Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity; and highlighting the primacy of exegesis over philosophy. The roots of what we know as the classic doctrine of the Trinity are exegetical.

What Holmes uncovers throughout his investigation are seven points of agreement among the orthodox throughout these eras:

1. The divine nature is simple, incomposite, and ineffable. It is also unrepeatable, and so, in crude and inexact terms 'one'.
2. Language referring to the divine nature is always inexact and trophic; nonetheless, if formulated with much care and more prayer, it might adequately, if not fully, refer.
3. There are three divine *hypostases* that are instantiations of the divine nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
4. The three divine *hypostases* exist really, eternally, and necessarily, and there is nothing divine that exists beyond or outside their existence.
5. The three divine *hypostases* are distinguished by eternal relations of origin – begetting and proceeding – and not otherwise.
6. All that is spoken of God, with the single and very limited exception of the language which refers to the relations of origin of the three *hypostases*, is spoken of the one life the three share, and so is indivisibly spoken of all three.
7. The relationships of origin express/establish relational distinctions between the three existent *hypostases*; no other distinctions are permissible. (146; 199-200)

These are not all points that modern theologians who have been said to be "reviving" the doctrine agree on. Holmes doesn't take a stand on whether or not the alleged revivers are correct; nor does he argue for the correctness of the classic doctrine; he simply recounts the history and notes the disparity.

But this is the volume's primary weakness; at least on my reading. I was ecstatic to read the first chapter and see Holmes challenge the modern trinitarian "revival." I think this challenge is necessary; but simply pointing out that this is not truly a revival doesn't seem to take the investigation far enough. Should we seek a revival of the classic doctrine or continue along the current path, which for all intents and purposes, seems bent toward one brand of social

trinitarianism or another. Holmes may not have the final (or even an authoritative) word on this, but his opinion would be both welcomed and helpful. We can't fault authors for not doing what they never intended to do in the first place, but we can question their original intentions and express a desire for them to have done more.

And this is really my main complaint. His retelling of history is more than adequate even if his style of writing leaves a bit to be desired (Holmes has what seems to be a deep appreciation for commas and semicolons, which result in long, sometimes cumbersome sentences). On one occasion he refers to Fr. John Behr's work as "astonishingly concise and informative" (92n39) and I'd describe Holmes' volume in much the same way. He runs through a lot of history in 200 pages and does a great job of covering the most important people, ideas, and events.

The book's target audience is said to be "upper-level undergraduates" (xvii) so Holmes doesn't shy away from technical jargon, but if I'm honest, I know more than a few grad students who would find certain portions of this work challenging. Holmes often provides his own translations of Greek, Latin, German, and French works, so it's not inconceivable to think that he could translate some of the technical vocabulary by providing a glossary of terms in the end of the volume (cf. Robert Letham's *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*). He does, after all, provide an index of technical terms/phrases in Latin/Greek (224). Even without such a feature, the back matter proves useful with its bibliography and indices.