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BOOK REVIEW

Thomas A. Noble and Jason S. Sexton, eds., *The Holy Trinity Revisited: Essays in Response to Stephen R. Holmes*. Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2015. xi + 187 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-842-27900-7. \$14.84.

Stephen Holmes's 2012 book, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life*, made the audacious claim that the so-called "Trinitarian Revival" of the twentieth century was no revival at all, but that it represented a distortion of the doctrine as articulated by patristic, medieval, and Reformation theologians. *The Holy Trinity Revisited: Essays in Response to Stephen R. Holmes* is a collection of papers "engaging with Holmes sympathetically but critically as to carry on the conversation" (2) initiated by Holmes's book. This collection of papers was drawn from the Christian Doctrine study group of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research that met in Cambridge in 2013. Each of these papers engages with at least one of three aspects of Holmes's book: (1) scriptural claims, (2) historical claims, and (3) theological claims.

In chapter 1, Fred Sanders, professor at Biola University, provides notes for a constructive Trinitarian theology in light of Holmes's work. He covers issues ranging from the scriptural basis of the doctrine to the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity. He concludes by recommending greater interaction between dogmatic theologians and analytic theologians.

Sanders's chapter is followed up by Robert Letham who also finds himself in broad agreement with Holmes's claim that the twentieth-century Trinitarian revival is a deviation from the classical church position; however, Letham extends Holmes's thesis and argues that we need a true Trinitarian revival in our

churches. Local congregations need to recover classical Trinitarian theology as a part of their worship, prayer, and liturgy. Finally, Letham pushes back on Holmes's claim that Eastern and Western Trinitarian theology are as similar as he has made them out to be.

In chapter 3, Kevin Giles expresses strong agreement with Holmes's general argument. However, Giles isolates three minor areas of disagreement. First, Giles has a more positive evaluation of the Nicene Fathers' exegetical work than does Holmes. Second, Giles believes that Holmes has overlooked the positive contributions that twentieth-century theology has made to the Nicene faith. Finally, Giles would have liked to have seen Holmes address the issues of eternal subordination and eternal generation as articulated by popular evangelical theologians like Wayne Grudem.

John Mackenzie begins the section of the book that addresses Holmes's work from a particular theological tradition's point of view by examining *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* from a Lutheran perspective. Primarily, Mackenzie asks if Holmes should have included Martin Luther to be a part of the great consensus of classical Trinitarian theology. According to Mackenzie, "there is a more fascinating Luther lurking behind the surface" (54). Mackenzie's position is that Luther's innovative Christology operates against his conservative Trinitarianism.

Jason Radcliff critiques Holmes by using T. F. Torrance. He argues forcefully that Torrance's absence in Holmes's account of the twentieth-century Trinitarian revival is a glaring omission. He argues that Torrance provides a model for how one ought to do Trinitarian theology in continuity with the church's consensus in a modern setting. Radcliff cites Torrance as a prime example of how to do traditional theology in a modern key.

R. T. Mullins responds to Holmes from the standpoint of analytic theology. Specifically, Mullins homes in on Holmes's claims about the doctrine of divine simplicity in classical Trinitarian theology. Mullins correctly points out the importance of simplicity in Holmes and the traditional accounts. He also correctly points out that ineffability and simplicity are two

doctrines that often go hand in hand. Mullins attempts to argue that, if divine simplicity is to be kept as a key doctrine of the Trinity, then one needs to give an account of simplicity which does not resort to ineffability, because ineffability is an incoherent concept and runs counter to Christian theology.

John Colwell offers a paper which emphasizes the role of apophaticism in patristic accounts of the Trinity. He suggests that John 17 is a key passage for understanding the relationship between the Father and the Son. However, we need to approach this passage with humility, recognizing that we cannot fully understand the sort of intimate relationship we see in the Father-and-Son interaction in this passage. Western theology, Colwell argues, has overstepped its bounds, being too quick to make claims about the eternal relationship between the Father and Son based upon this passage. Colwell believes that the solution to this problem is to recover the apophaticism of the early church fathers.

In chapter eight Michael Bird, a biblical scholar, assesses Holmes's use of scripture in *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life*. Like all the other contributors to this volume, he also expresses general agreement with Holmes's claims. Because Bird has little to offer in terms of critique, he instead tries to offer a fuller account of the scriptural claims that Holmes makes. Specifically, he addresses Holmes's claim that the Old Testament is the basis for a burgeoning Christology. He claims that the New Testament evinces exegetical pressure to find ways to speak about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that preserve both divine monotheism and the divinity of the three persons of the Trinity.

The final response to Holmes is the Tyndale Christian Doctrine Lecture for 2013 presented by Graham Watts. He focuses on Holmes's claims about the revival on the issue of the relationship between God and history. Watts argues that to get a full grasp on this issue we need to pay more attention to Reformation debates over Christology. In this sense, Watts's argument is similar to John Mackenzie's argument. Watts believes that these debates affect modern Trinitarian theology more than we have realized. As a solution to this issue, Watts

recommends that we turn to Torrance who provides us with an example of how we ought to do a Trinitarian theology that pays attention not only to the church fathers but also to the Reformers as well.

The final essay consists of Holmes's response to four sets of issues brought up by the other contributors: (1) scriptural concerns; (2) philosophical concerns; (3) historical questions about the *filioque*, Augustine, Luther, and Torrance; and (4) matters of practical theology.

There is much to be appreciated in this collection of essays. For instance, two often-overlooked areas of theology receive special attention. The first is the area of analytic theology. Both Sanders and Mullins draw attention to the fact that analytic theology has much to offer to the type of Trinitarian conversations contained in this book and others. Analytic theology is theology that adopts the form and virtues of analytic philosophy to do theology. Chief among these virtues is clarity and precision. Much of the Trinitarian revival has been done according to the standards of continental philosophy; bringing analytic theology to the conversation could help to alleviate some of the problems inherent to the continental mode of doing philosophical theology.

In addition to paying special attention to analytic theology, this book also serves to draw more attention to Torrance. As noted by Sanders, Letham, Giles, Radcliff, and Watt, Torrance was glaringly absent from Holmes's discussion of the Trinitarian "revival." Increasingly, Torrance is being recognized within theological circles as a voice that needs to be engaged. Hopefully, this collection of essays will serve to stimulate further study of Torrance's dogmatic theology and not just his religious epistemology. In addition to these two points, there are many insightful essays, including John Mackenzie's essay and Noble and Sexton's conclusion. Mackenzie brings up a compelling point regarding Luther's Christology that could do much to explain some of the major problems of Trinitarianism in the twentieth century. Noble and Sexton should also be commended for drawing out some of the missiological and liturgical elements of Trinitarian theology.

Despite these and other strengths, this book certainly has its flaws. Many of these flaws are addressed in Holmes's response in chapter 10; nevertheless, some shortcomings need to be pointed out. For instance, at times some of the essays in this book simply appear to be summarizing Holmes's position. Certainly, this book is supposed to be "critically appreciative," but some of these essays are barely critical. Giles and Bird's essays are perfect examples of these sorts of essays; they do not make significant contributions to the Trinitarian conversation generated by Holmes.

Mullins's essay on divine simplicity completely misses its mark. His use of analytic theology is helpful until he forgets the nuances of the historical claims he is arguing against. Mullins's argument relies on his claim that ineffability is self-referentially incoherent, yet the version of ineffability that he ascribes to Trinitarian theologians is one that would hardly be recognized by most theologians. Mullins argues that ineffability is synonymous with unknowability, yet ineffability does not function this way in any of the theologians that Holmes engages. If Mullins had paid more attention to the historical context of Trinitarian theology, he would have known that ineffability functions more like partial comprehension rather than complete unknowability. This mistake undermines his whole argument against divine simplicity, thus causing his whole essay to fall short of its intended purpose.

Despite the problem with this essay and a few smaller problems within some of the other essays, the collection as a whole is commendable. For pastors, this collection will be helpful in that it will help prevent pastors from jumping into the latest theological fad (i.e., much of twentieth-century Trinitarian theology) and encourage them to take seriously the historical positions of the church. Those in the academy will appreciate the further areas of research suggested by this book—for instance, T. F. Torrance's role in the Trinitarian revival or Luther's influence on contemporary Trinitarian theology. Overall this is a necessary book; it fills in some of the gaps left open in Holmes's important book. Though this collection would have been better if some of the contributors pushed back more against Holmes's thesis, it is still an important contribution to the conversation about

Trinitarian theology that Holmes helped to generate.

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