

## BOOK REVIEWS

Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2021. 368 pp. Paperback. \$24.99

In his treatise on the Trinity, Augustine asserted, “Nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous.” Matthew Barrett, Professor of Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, is a theologian who intimately understands what is at stake, much like Augustine did. Exploring the doctrine of God is the most perilous and rewarding expedition we can embark upon. There are steep cliffs to be avoided, ravenous wolves to be slain, and maps and guideposts to be followed, but there is infinitely valuable treasure to be discovered in the end. Uniquely, this journey requires traversing through ancient chronicles; after all, the Trinity is the God who has revealed himself in history. Furthermore, the way to discovering the biblical, orthodox Trinity is by retracing the ancient steps of our forefathers, who walked the same path for centuries. It is only in modern times that weeds and rocks have obscured the trail. Through the Scriptures and the Great Tradition, Barrett guides us as we trod down it once again, discovering the God who is simply Trinity.

*Simply Trinity* is a theological retrieval project for the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. However, that alone would be a deficient explanation, because it is also a polemic against Social Trinitarianism (ST), a diverse movement that “redefined the doctrine of the Trinity as a society of relationships in which each person cooperates by means of his (or her) own center of consciousness and will” (32). Barrett is resolute in aiming to make Nicene Trinitarianism central to the evangelical heritage, precisely because he believes that the doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the gospel itself. *Simply Trinity* is a sort-of sequel to *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*, an earlier popular level retrieval project where Barrett introduced an array of classical divine attributes. In both projects, Barrett is highly concerned with evangelical idolatry—that we are “making God” in our own image. Underlying both books is the assumption that we cannot be faithful evangelicals without an orthodox doctrine of God. Building on that earlier work, Barrett focuses on a particular attribute of God in *Simply Trinity*, that is, divine simplicity, and how it is essential to the doctrine of the Trinity. He is swimming against the tide of what he calls “Trinity drift.” According to Barrett, in modern times we have gradually drifted away from the doctrine of the Trinity confessed by Christians throughout history. Moreover, this drifting has led to redefinition, and redefinition has licensed manipulation of the Trinity for our own ends. As

Barrett puts it, “The Trinity is our social program” (31).

The structure of *Simply Trinity*, much like its tone, is clear and accessible: (1) “How did we drift away?” and (2) “How do we find our way home?” Part one provides the audience with necessary context and information to understand the current state of trinitarian doctrine. Barrett’s historical work is brief but intentional. He begins with Orthodox Trinitarianism (OT) at the Council of Nicaea and then explains the development of ST within modern theology. Part two is the main and constructive portion of the book, where Barrett retrieves key doctrines and brings OT, through the Scriptures and the Great Tradition, to bear on ST.

While there are two *parts* to this book, I observe that there are three central *moves* that Barrett makes. While he does not mention this, these seem to correlate well with the aforementioned words of Augustine: (1) the laborious search, (2) the dangerous mistakes, (3) and the advantageous discovery. Chapter 2 is where Barrett makes this initial move. The laborious search includes a crash-course in “trinitarian grammar,” which is the language “that teaches us how to distinguish between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as Scripture does, but without compromising the simplicity (oneness) of our triune God” (38). In this chapter, Barrett introduces us to key terms such as *ousia* (essence) and *homoousios* (same essence), along with the grammar that distinguishes the three persons of the Trinity: unbegotten and paternity, begotten and filiation, spirated and spiration. Barrett emphasizes these modes of subsistence, eternal relations of origin, or personal properties as the only distinguishing marks between the three persons of the one God. Central to Barrett’s argument is his stalwart defense of divine simplicity, which necessitates inseparable operations in the Trinity—a doctrine that teaches that the God who is One *ad intra* works inseparably *ad extra*.

The second move Barrett makes is to show the dangerous mistakes that we might make regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, specifically targeting ST. It seems that, for Barrett, in order for us to understand the mistakes, we need to understand the history. The initial mistake happened in the wake of the Enlightenment, which introduced a false dichotomy between absolute truth (located in human reason) and contingent truth (located in history) (71). This created significant problems for Christian doctrines like the Trinity, because “the Bible’s claims about the Trinity are rooted in a revelation that was transmitted through historical persons and events” (71). Thus, as the central doctrine of Christianity became “speculative” and “irrelevant,” Christianity became less about who God is and more about what God does in society. This created the theological environment necessary for Karl Rahner’s Rule, which influenced everything afterwards:

“The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.” These terms, “immanent” and “economic,” and the relation between the two are central to the entire book. ST (following Rahner’s Rule), collapses the immanent into the economic and the economic is said to constitute the immanent. “Who God is in eternity is reduced to his acts in history; indeed, his acts in history even make him who he is as Trinity” (88). For Barrett, this is the mistake underlying all other mistakes in ST, and this is precisely the problem with the modern evangelical assertion of the Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS) of the Son to the Father.

Barrett’s third and final move takes place in chapters 4–10, where he displays the advantages of discovering the God who has revealed himself in history as *Simply Trinity*. The fundamental move here is using the tools discovered by our forefathers to see the unmanipulated Triune God. Barrett begins chapter four with a “Key Point” that underscores the entire project: “The Trinity is revealed in the gospel, but we must not conflate or collapse God in himself, apart from the world (immanent Trinity), with God’s actions toward creation and salvation (economic Trinity) or we will manipulate the Trinity” (98). He relentlessly reiterates that missions reveal processions (eternal relations of origin) and the economic does not constitute the immanent. He intentionally begins with the one God (as Scripture does) before properly discussing paternity, filiation, and spiration. While Barrett emphasizes the necessity of each eternal relation, filiation (or eternal generation) is really at the heart of this book. As much as it is a polemic against the broad movement of ST, its narrow focus is the strand of ST that has breached the walls of evangelicalism through the “Eternal Functional Subordination” of the Son.

Chapter 7, “Is Eternal Generation Central to the Gospel?” is a major highlight of the book. It is theological reasoning from the Scriptures; it is biblical reasoning. Barrett is doing biblical exegesis alongside the Great Tradition, not necessarily because the Fathers, Medievals, or Reformers were right about everything, but because they were right about the gospel, and eternal generation is central to the gospel. He surveys the modern *monogenes* controversy, convincingly arguing for the English translation of “Only-Begotten,” but he also identifies some of the other key phrases in Scripture that testify to the same reality: Radiance, Image, Wisdom/Word, and Ancient of Days. Barrett concludes that eternal generation is “the warp and woof of the Bible, the doctrine on which the entire story depends” (210). He is emphatic that the doctrine of the Trinity has direct implications for soteriology: “If he is not eternally generated, what hope do we have that we will be regenerated? Unless he is born from the Father from all eternity, we have

little confidence we will be born again and enter the kingdom of the Son” (210). This chapter helps the reader understand Barrett’s bold claims in the following chapter regarding EFS. If eternal generation truly is central to the gospel, then anyone who essentially (or functionally) dismisses the doctrine, loses the gospel along with it.

Barrett sets out to prove in Chapter 8 that EFS is a strand of ST, manipulating the Trinity to fit their views of hierarchical gender roles. He makes three serious accusations against “EFSers” along the way: Tritheism (227–30), Sabellianism/Modalism (230–32), and Subordinationism (232–38). He does not accuse them of outright heresy, which is important to note. However, he does conclude, “Even if EFS is not an exact match with a historical heresy, we’ve seen that the *logic* of its position as well as its substitution of orthodox categories for social ones brings EFSers, albeit inadvertently, dangerously close to three heresies” (256). Regardless of whether or not one agrees with each of Barrett’s individual accusations, it is evident that Barrett is not “heresy-hunting.” Barrett writes as a conservative, complementarian evangelical against other conservative, complementarian evangelicals. This is significant. Barrett’s impassioned rebuttal to EFS is precisely because it is so close to home; it is an in-house debate. As much as this is an ardent defense of OT, it is also a winsome call for his evangelical brothers to reconsider the *logic* of their position. Barrett identifies the “central fault line” as their hermeneutics (238). Juxtaposing Rahner’s Rule with “Augustine’s Rules,” he argues that there is a better way to interpret the Scriptures. Rather than collapsing the immanent into the economic, we distinguish between them. For example, some texts speak of the Son in “the form of God,” some in the “form of a servant,” and others with respect to his being “from the Father” (240). Barrett puts these rules into practice while interpreting 1 Corinthians 15, which is a classic EFS text, to show how these ancient exegetical rules help rather than hinder our hermeneutics.

Any critiques that I have of *Simply Trinity* are marginal compared to the tremendous service that this book has done for the Church. Yet, there are a few things worth mentioning. Overall, Barrett does good work arguing for a distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity. He frequently reminds us that missions “reveal” or “reflect” processions, rather than constituting them (e.g., 111, 118, 241). Sparingly, he employs the Medieval notion of “fittingness” as well. For example, Barrett explains, “it is because the Father *begets* his Son in eternity that it is fitting for the Father to *send* his Son to become incarnate in history. And it is because the Father and the Son together (as one source) *spirate* the Spirit in eternity that it is fitting for the Father and the Son to *send* (give)

the Spirit in history” (117). When Barrett discusses *appropriations* in the covenant of redemption, he employs the language once again (309), but these are the only instances where he substantively interacts with the terminology. These two sections are fantastic, but Barrett could have greatly aided the project by widely employing “fittingness.” Furthermore, given his numerous helpful excursus, charts, and sidebars defining key terms or identifying premier theologians, describing the language of fittingness (especially in Anselmic and Thomistic usage) would have been an ample addition to *Simply Trinity*, particularly because it guards the freedom and aseity of God (117), which ST fails to do by making salvation necessary (rather than fitting) for God.

Further, while Barrett assumes a difference between appropriation and mission throughout the book, he is not specific about the distinction. A “Key Word” section on appropriations, where Barrett must be succinct, accentuates this ambiguity. Presupposing divine simplicity and inseparable operations, he claims, “since the one essence has three modes of subsistence (eternal relations of origin), a particular work may be ‘appropriated’ by a particular person, but always in a way that is consistent with that person’s mode of subsistence.” This is fundamentally correct, but he continues, “For example, the Son is sent by the Father to become incarnate, which corresponds to his mode of subsistence (eternal relation): begotten” (224). This example seems to align more closely to his definition of mission than appropriation. In the glossary, his definition of appropriations is basically the same, except the example, which is that “the Father is Creator, which conveys he is the origin of the Trinity” (319). This example rightly appropriates an action to one person of the Trinity, but without excluding the others. In other words, the Father, Son, and Spirit are Creator, but creation is appropriated to the Father because he is unoriginate. By contrast, while the three persons inseparably act in the incarnation, only “the Son is sent by the Father to become incarnate.” The incarnation is the Son’s mission alone. By Barrett’s own attestation, mission “refers to the Son and Spirit being sent into the world. Each person’s mission reflects each person’s eternal relation of origin” (322). Thus, while both missions and appropriations fit eternal relations of origin, they must be distinguished. To be fair, the book’s brevity and lay-level audience forces Barrett to be selective with those doctrines he can parse in detail. However, even within the confines of such a project, he could have been clearer about the distinction, given that some readers (especially because of the broad audience) might be tempted to conflate the categories. That withstanding, I am eager to note that Barrett intends to spend time differentiating between the two in his forthcoming *Systematic Theology* with Baker Academic, where he will have more

space to elaborate.

Despite these minor criticisms, *Simply Trinity* is an exemplary accomplishment. This is a welcome contribution to the ongoing theological retrieval efforts, especially regarding the doctrine of the Trinity and Nicene orthodoxy. It continues the scholarly discourse on eternal generation and EFS, while dealing a death blow to ST. But Barrett's greatest achievement is *Simply Trinity's* accessibility for lay-people in the local church. This is not a mere theological exercise or doctrinal hullabaloo for Matthew Barrett; this is the center of the Christian faith, and this discussion is one that demands attention from professors and youth group volunteers alike. There is no other matter of the Christian faith where a mistake is more dangerous, the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous. Take up and read!

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