

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard C. Barcellos, *Trinity & Creation: A Scriptural and Confessional Account*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2020. 117 pp. Paperback / \$15.00

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Why pen another book on the doctrine of Trinity and Creation? As stated above, it was really a conference that led to this book, but why have such a conference? Consider the following questions: "Does creation change God or does God change God in order for God to relate with creation?" These questions imply change in God and lend themselves to Open Theism or Process Theology. Thus, when the spirit of the age blows novelty near the foundation and pillars of the Church's long standing and orthodox teaching on the doctrine of God, it is crucial that we pay attention and take every novel thought captive. Novelty in theology often leads to heresy and heresy that enters and stays, like leaven, infiltrates, spreads, and corrupts biblical teaching.

Among other Reformed confessions, one finds the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF, 1646), *The Savoy Declaration* (SD, 1658), and the *Second London Baptist Confession* (2LCF, 1689). Barcellos will allude to the three, but for the purposes of his book he will primarily deal with the 2LCF and secondarily the WCF. Why these two confessions? Both of these are Reformed Confessions and they are similar, but as it relates to the doctrine of creation, the wording is slightly different. Being that Barcellos is a Reformed Baptist pastor and theologian, he will utilize the 2LCF 4.1, but he mentions the WCF given that the two contemporary theologians who have introduced novelty subscribe to the WCF.

Barcellos' book is divided into seven chapters: In the introduction, he situates the context and ground work for what will follow in latter chapters. What does Trinity and creation mean? Barcellos states that it means "God and everything not God" or God and His creation (1). He discusses how the book will unfold using the 2LCF 4.1 as an outline to account for the confessional doctrine of creation by the Triune God. The general statement on the 2LCF 4.1 reads: "In the beginning it pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, to create or make the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days,

and all very good.” Barcellos’ aim is to introduce readers to the confessional era of the seventeenth century and their treatment of Trinitarian creation so that we may learn from the past (5).

In chapter two, Barcellos notes that the issue is method, that is, how does one account for how the Bible speaks of God in relation to His creation (19). He focuses on hermeneutical principles and theological method using the 2LCF as an outline to properly speak about Trinitarian creation. Moreover, Barcellos helps the reader understand what a confession of faith is and the context of the 2LCF 4.1. Barcellos states that the “confessional doctrine of trinitarian creation” is a doctrinal formulation (1). Barcellos observes that a confession of faith is essentially a summary form of what the Bible teaches on a given subject. In other words, they are the doctrinal conclusions of the subjects that are being addressed in the Scriptures. Barcellos is quick to note, however, that confessions and their use of Scripture citations are not an example of proof texting, but the product of exegesis which led to doctrinal formulation (7). Barcellos rightly concludes that the study of God or theology proper is the basis for the study of the *oikonomia* (God’s external works). While we learn about God as Trinity via the *oikonomia*, it is the Trinity via the *oikonomia*, particularly in Scripture, Who illuminates the *oikonomia* (16). Additionally, in treating *theologia* (theology proper) we must also have a robust doctrine of Scripture which speaks about itself as the authoritative and inspired word of God which reveals to us the God “Who” is and “what” God does (20). In this way, we can arrive at a proper interpretation of Scripture because Scripture interprets Scripture; God inspires his Word and it is he who interprets his Word (23). Barcellos offers 3 ways to retrieve a theological method that will serve the church: First, “Respect the theological grammar of the Christian tradition.” By this Barcellos means that we need not change the meaning of old words used in the confessions. Second, “We must understand the difference between biblical theology and systematic Theology” (24). The framework for biblical theology is the progressive nature of salvation-history unfolding in Scripture. The latter builds upon the fruit of biblical theology and is distinguished by the focus on what the Bible teaches on any given topic. Third, “We need help.” This is an honest assessment of the state of affairs. Many lack the historical and theological training required to develop a sound theological method and ability to identify heresy.

In Chapter three, he explores the outline and progressive nature of the 2LCF 4.1, its strategic placement in the confession, and its purpose as it relates to Trinitarian creation. The general statement found in 2LCF 4.1 is divided into eight points. This chapter will provide commentary on the eight points. Those

points are: Inception (4.1a), ground (4.1b), author (4.1c), its goal (4.1d), its essence (4.1e), its scope (4.1f), its duration (4.1g), and its, nature (4.1h).

In chapter four, Barcellos provides a definition of creation and resources four seventeenth-century theologians and their understanding of God and creation. Before answering what creation is, having some conception of God is necessary to having a proper understanding of creation (40). It is vital that one understand that God is separate, distinct, and different from his creation. Given that God creates, it must be reiterated that there is no change in God when he creates, rather the change occurs in creation. The four seventeenth-century theologians have in common the Reformed grammar that aligns itself with the 2LCF. Having this understanding of the Creator-creature distinction enables one to compare the two contemporary Reformed theologian's novel proposal concerning the Creator/creature distinction (40).

In chapter five he analyzes two contemporary Reformed theologians, namely, John M. Frame and K. Scott Oliphint, whose novel treatment of God and creation are found to be problematic. Hence the two questions noted earlier, "Does creation change God or does God change God in order for God to relate with creation?" Frame proposes two modes of existence in God. Oliphint suggested that God took upon some attributes, characteristics and properties that were not his before creation (53). Why do they make such proposals? Barcellos offers two reasons. One, is the desire to make sense of divine immanence in relation to God's creation and God's divine transcendence (70). Given this desire, they propose a type of change in God so that he can relate to and with His creatures. But as Barcellos rightly posits, "Frame and Oliphint (though unintentionally) end up compromising *both* divine simplicity and divine immutability, as well as divine infinity and divine eternity" (70–1). Two, is to make sense of the metaphorical and analogical language used in Scripture. To say that God has two modes of existence because of creation is to treat God as creation. God does not come to exist at any point, nor does he change himself, for he is immutable. There is danger in speaking in the way that Frame and Oliphint do as it opens the door to process Theology. Barcellos contends that they have departed from the Classic, historic and Reformed tradition as it relates to Trinitarian creation.

In chapter six, Barcellos returns to the doctrine of the Trinity and creation. There he considers the doctrine of appropriations in John Owen's "*Peculiar Works of the Holy Spirit in the First or Old Creation.*" Here Barcellos highlights the theological method and hermeneutics classically employed when making sense of Trinitarian creation. A discussion on the doctrine of appropriations would not be complete

if the doctrine of the relation of origins *ad intra* and the doctrine of inseparable operations were not interwoven into the discussion.

Lastly, he concludes with a summary of the book and provides some brief suggestions for students of theology and pastors. *Trinity & Creation* as it is understood in the confession, “takes us from the inception of creation to the ground of creation, the author of creation, the goal of creation, the essence of creation, the scope of creation, the duration of creation and the nature of creation” (100). Having understood this, Barcellos exhorts his readers to allow this orthodoxy to turn into orthopraxy.

Does Barcellos accomplish what he set out to accomplish? He does so. Barcellos effectively demonstrates that the confession is simply a reformulation of what Scripture already teaches in summarized form. In speaking of Trinitarian creation, in the 2LCF 4.1, Barcellos shows that there is justified reason for the confession’s strategic chapter placement. 2LCF 4.1 is preceded by God’s decree which is then preceded by God and the Holy Trinity and then by the Holy Scriptures. Here we see the proper order of *Theologia* preceding *oikonomia*. An interesting thing to note is that in the book, Barcellos stated that the Holy Scriptures are part of the *oikonomia* and as such point to God (11–3), but why do Confessions start with the Holy Scriptures and not with *theologia* if the proper order is *theologia* before *oikonomia*? There is a clue, in the fact that the Enlightenment took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus, the starting point is man’s reason making sense of revelation. But before the enlightenment, one would see that *Theologia* preceded the Holy Scriptures. One look at Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* will demonstrate that his starting point is God, not Scripture. Another theologian to consider would be Francis Turretin and his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. He, like Aquinas, begins with theology and then moves on to Scripture. Barcellos is aware of this when he writes, “Without allowing first place to theology proper, we cannot make sense of the cosmological assertions of Scripture...” (13). Nevertheless, the confession gets it right when *theologia* precedes *oikonomia*.

Why discuss the doctrine of the Trinity and Creation? Both of these doctrines are distributive doctrines, that is, they form the center from which other doctrines spring forth. The Triune God is the necessary being without whom nothing that has begun to exist can exist. God is Creator and not creation. God is eternal, infinite, immutable, and simple. Similarly, creation is the *ad extra* or external work of God and therefore temporal, finite, and mutable, but nevertheless foundational for other doctrines. In other words, ‘who’ God is, determines ‘what’ God does. The proper order, then, is *theologia* precedes *oikonomia*. To say that

oikonomia precedes *theologia* is to open the door to all sorts of theological errors as Barcellos demonstrates in chapter five. As has been rightly stated by many theologians, “To get the doctrine of God wrong is to get everything else wrong” (14).

The errors spoken of previously relate to having a purely *oikonomia* driven understanding of God, and we run the risk of Rahner’s rule: the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. This sounds as if we are speaking of two trinities. Barcellos observes that having an *oikonomia* driven understanding of God and creation is the root of “all forms of process theism and that of older Socinians” (17). He is absolutely right.

There are three things to consider when reading this book. First, if someone is not acquainted with how confessions function, then one might question why such emphasis is given to the Confession rather than to the Bible as the singular source of authority. Nevertheless, Barcellos provides the helpful insight and guidance concerning the function and nature of confessions. Second, there are times in which Barcellos gives many examples to make his point. This can feel a bit much, but nevertheless he is attempting to make the point that what is enshrined in the confession is a doctrine that arises from exegesis and not a superimposed theology with various scriptural citations as proof texts. Third, if one is not familiar with classical theology and discussions of the Trinity, then this book may be a difficult read, but needless to say, pick up Richard Muller’s second edition of *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* and/or Fred Sanders’, *The Deep Things of God* to help along the way. That being said, it is a book that was written specifically for pastors and students of theology, but serious Christians will likewise benefit from its content. This book will help pastors and seminary students to employ hermeneutical principles coupled with a sound and robust theological method for accounting for doctrinal formulations found in Confessional accounts.

Trinity & Creation is a great resource for anyone wanting to learn more about the relationship between God and his creation from Scripture and the 2LCF. Barcellos beautifully accomplishes the task that he set out to accomplish. I highly recommend *Trinity & Creation: A Scriptural and Confession Account* to anyone who wants to understand Trinitarian creation and what is at stake if we depart from classical and historic theology for novelty.

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