



Letham, Robert.

The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship

Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004. Pp. xv + 551. Paper. \$24.99. ISBN 9780875520001.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Having never heard of Dr. Letham I picked this book up for some research that I was doing on the doctrine of the Trinity for a book project that I was working on and to my surprise this was the best book on the subject I had ever read! Dr. Letham says in the preface to this volume, “*Sadly, since the time of Calvin, little of significance has been contributed to the development of Trinitarian doctrine by conservative Reformed theologians.*” (ix) Such is no longer the case as this work is nothing less than significant to the serious student of theology.

He notes in his introduction the potential problems for Trinitarians such as the necessary use of extra-biblical language due to the debates that occurred in the early Church, as well as the Eastern Church’s tendency towards subordinationism, and the Western Church’s bent towards modalism (1-4). Letham is both fair and accurate in his portrayal of the facts, not showing favoritism or bias. It was refreshing to see such an in-depth exploration of the Eastern position on the Trinity.

From the introduction Letham begins by laying the foundation for Trinity in Scripture with its Old Testament background. He begins with God as creator and points out a pattern of creation whereas everything was created in 2 groups of 3 days each. He then moves onto the Angel of the Lord and the theophanies in the Old Testament while weaving these themes into Israel’s monotheism and showing a distinction in God. This is followed up with a treatment on the Father as God and the Spirit of God before concluding the first chapter with some facts on the Word/Wisdom of God and the expectations of the coming Messiah. The first chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

Time and space prohibit me from writing as much as I would like to in reference to this work, but I will say this. Letham covers nearly every theologian who has ever written

anything significant concerning the Trinity from the 1st century with Paul to the modern era with T.F. Torrance covering everyone from the Cappadocians to Calvin in between. No stone was left unturned and as I stated above, he presented the facts fairly and accurately (although as a Calvinist he did show what seemed to me to be a greater appreciation for Calvin than any other theologian addressed). Letham has an uncanny ability to represent a man's position as it actually stands and not as Letham wished it would have, while noting the strengths and weaknesses of said position. This is the tone of the work throughout.

His treatments on John of Damascus and the perichoretic relationship that exists within the Trinity is masterful... simply the best I have read to date! To my great surprise Letham spent quite a bit of time on some modern Eastern theologians (Sergius Bulgakov, Vladimir Lossky, and Dumitru Staniloae) documenting their positions on Eastern Love Mysticism saying that:

These thinkers begin their discussion of the the Trinity from an analysis of personhood. They understand persons, not as individual entities, but in communion with others. From this, they see the Trinity as a communion of love. [323-24]

A very enlightening chapter indeed as I had previously been ignorant of these theologians or their contributions to an idea that Augustine had broken ground on in the 4th century.

While I would love to give a summary of each chapter that is impossible as there is so much that could be said. But I will close with these remarks. Letham doesn't simply treat the Trinity as orthodox theology or a necessary doctrine (of course he recognizes that it is these things)—but rather he treats the Trinity as it truly is... GOD! This sets the scene for his chapter on the Trinity in Worship and Prayer. He recognizes that in lieu of our post-modern society the Trinity has largely been lost in our praise and worship of God. He documents everything from Christian hymns to the Charismatic special focus on the Holy Spirit, in support of this position.

Arguing from the base that we cannot begin with the essence of God as has classically been done in the West since Augustine or any one person of God (i.e. the Father) as has been classically done in the East since the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus) Letham suggests that we return to all three persons of God as our proper object or worship and prayer. He says:

The church's worship is grounded in who God is and what he has done. The Father has sent the Son 'for us and our salvation'...In turn, the Father together with the Son has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the church...Not only is our salvation a work of God, not only is it Trinitarian through and through, but it is initiated by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit. (413)

I leave the reader with one caveat—if you have not taken the time to study who and what God is in depth, then this is not the book to start with. This book as wonderful as it is, and even with its glossary of terms (497-503), is not for the immature believer. I would suggest beginning with something more basic such as Gerald O'Collins' *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, supplemented with readings of the Ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers before picking this volume up. But if you are acquainted with the doctrine of the Trinity and have a desire to know even more about it, then this is the book for you. Whatever the price, buy it! It's well worth it! I'd suggest it for the footnotes and bibliography alone—it's that good!