



Olson, Roger E. and Christopher A. Hall

The Trinity (Guides to Theology)

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The Trinity is the first book in the Guides to Theology series (followed by *Feminist Theology* (Eerdmans, 2003) and the forthcoming *The Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, 2008). The editors describe this series saying:

This series of Guides to Theology is written primarily with students in mind. We also hope that pastors, church leaders, and theologians will find them useful introductions to the field. Our aim is to provide a brief introduction to the chosen field, followed by an annotated bibliography of important works, which should serve as an entrée to the topic. (n.p.)

After reading through this slim volume, I can say with confidence that the editors have accomplished their objective. This book is a brief introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity that takes account for the Biblical roots, historical development, and contemporary discussion of the doctrine. As far as introductions go, it's good. The information is accurate, readable, and informative. So the question then becomes: How does this introduction stack up against others?

As compared to La Due's *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity*, I found this to be an easier read (and that's saying something since La Due's book was highly readable/enjoyable). Olson and Hall take a narrative approach to outlining the doctrine and its development that make the book a real page turner (I completed it in a couple of hours). That being said, La Due's book was more engaging when it came to contemporary theologians. As compared to Dünzl's *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, I found this to be comparable, but not as well-done. I did however appreciate that Scripture was the starting point for this work, and that the Apostolic Fathers were given adequate treatment.

I do have a couple of criticisms for this volume though:

Firstly: Olson and Hall draw too heavily from Gerald O'Collins' *The Tripersonal God* throughout the first chapter. O'Collins' book is brilliant, and I would recommend it to any interested party, but the authors quote from it so much, and appropriate so many of its themes, that it would have been easier to simply refer readers to O'Collins' work and not even write that section.

Secondly: The authors at times quote the Church Fathers from secondary sources when it would have been just as easy, and certainly more appropriate to quote the primary material. Christopher A. Hall is co-editor of the *Ancient Christian Commentary* series and author of *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, as well as *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*. His familiarity with patristic literature makes me wonder why the Fathers were not cited directly from their own works every time they are quoted or referenced in this volume. This also goes to my first criticism, in that many times the fathers were quoted or cited as O'Collins quotes or cites them in his book.

Thirdly: I found an odd statement in the opening pages which was later contradicted. The authors said:

At the same time other Christians affirmed the full and true deity of the Son of God Jesus Christ, but rejected any true ontological distinctness between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These Sabellians or Modalists reduced the persons of the Trinity to mere manifestations or modes of the one person God. (2)

My problem with the passage is that the authors seem to be saying that there is an "ontological distinctness between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," in order to oppose Modalism, but if this is what they're saying, then the end result is tri-theism. The contradiction comes later when they say: "*The distinctions, therefore, within the Trinity are not substantial (resulting in polytheism or tritheism), but personal.*" (30) To this I have no objection, but it doesn't seem consistent with the previous statement. I'm willing to believe this to be a slip of the pen, and an oversight that will hopefully be corrected in subsequent editions of this volume.

So what sets this volume apart from others like it? The answer is the annotated bibliography. Functioning basically as the third chapter in the book, there is a thirty-one page bibliography covering patristic texts, medieval theological works, Reformation material, and lastly modern contributions. I have been introduced to some authors that I hadn't previously known about through this bibliography, and for that I am thankful. Olson and Hall have produced a competent introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity, but they've done so in such a way as to wet the appetite. The great thing is that they provide the directions to the restaurant along with the utensils and condiments for the hungry reader to enjoy a full meal.