

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

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Pastor-theologian, Robert Letham, comes well prepared for his task, one which evangelicals have greatly neglected for many decades. With a Ph. D. from Aberdeen University in Scotland and full-time Presbyterian Pastorate, Letham approaches the Trinity with both a deep scholarly yet a very personal and pastoral approach. One of the most outstanding features is that Letham is both very thorough and discerning, yet at the same time gracious and as fair as is possible, as we shall see. Another excellent feature that he brings to the task is judicious biblical exegesis, which, unfortunately, is unusual for a book on the Trinity. The first large section of the volume (up to page 84) develops the incipient Trinitarianism in the Old Testament. Next, he analyzes Jesus' relationship with the Father in the Johannine and Pauline writings. Last, he furnishes an excellent excursus on the "Ternary Patterns in Ephesians."

After exegesis Letham provides a careful historical survey of views from the post-apostolic days to the present. He reviews each author then intersperses his brilliant and insightful critique based upon his wide reading and his own insights. Throughout the whole discussion he has a well-formulated perspective on Trinitarian teaching that he

uses as a template to evaluate each author, as I shall discuss.

Last, Letham makes excellent application of his balanced Trinitarian Theology to the relevant cultural and missiological issues of Islam, “Trinity, Creation, and Mission,” prayer; Trinity and the definition of “person,” and last the issue of women’s ordination. In so doing he rejects a Platonic theology of eternal forms divorced from the nitty-gritty of life on earth and applies his deep pastoral and missional insight. These sections are a must read for anyone desiring to apply theology to mission in the contemporary world.

Now, an illustration of the methodology Letham uses is how he overviews, for example, Bulgarian Orthodox author Dumitru Staniloae’s dilemma. This conundrum, common to Eastern Orthodox thought, teaches that God is in his essence unknowable. Letham cites T. F. Torrance’s insightful discussion about John Calvin’s approach. Calvin overcame a very similar problem—common also among Roman Catholics of his day—by his doctrine of “Word and Spirit.” Roman Catholic teaching reduced the knowledge of God to the beautiful vision, thus reducing knowledge of God, in effect, to the dogma of the Roman Church. Calvin responded that we cannot ever see God but we can hear him in the “Word, preached and read. The Holy Spirit accompanies the Word and graciously grants us direct intuitive knowledge of God as we hear him in faith. The East has never addressed this vital point of Calvin’s” (351).

In each critique, Letham uses a balanced perspective on the relationship of the unity and diversity within the Godhead to evaluate each perspective. For example, even though his harshest words are reserved for Jürgen Moltmann, he still is exceedingly fair. Moltmann approaches the doctrine of the Trinity with an explicit rejection of any hierarchical authority. Moltmann fondly cites Marxist playwright and philosopher Ernst

Bloch: “Where the great Lord of the universe reigns, there is no place for liberty” (309). Moltmann’s social doctrine of the Trinity, Letham writes, thus gives “no fixed order between the three, for their ‘relationship’ . . . is that of mutual, reciprocal love in freedom. There is emphatically no subordination. . . . This follows Moltmann’s complete rejection of lordship and authority” (305). Moltmann’s trinity is virtually a projection of the Marxist ideal of the communal society from which humankind devolved and toward which it is re-evolving. Letham then issues his harshest critique:

[Moltmann’s] view of God as suffering love, cosuffering with the world, is that of a weak bystander who can do nothing to change the situation. He simply suffers, God is a feminized God, indeed a transexual deity, a motherly Father and a fatherly Mother. In turn, Moltmann’s Christian society is a feminized society of persons in relationship, devoid of authority. One might call it a castrated theology. It is a mixture of Christian teaching and paganism. (312)

This anti-authority and communitarian ideal, some argue, leads Moltmann to come as close to tritheism as has any theologian ever had. Letham agrees: “For Moltmann, the trinity is not one subject but a fellowship of three subjects” (308). But then he immediately adds a gracious note: “If we want to be kind to Moltmann, we can point out that while he drifts uncomfortably close to tritheism, he draws salutary attention to the fact that God is God in three irreducibly different ways.” Letham continues: “Each [person] is different from the others, and will ever be so. Yet God is one undivided being” (308). Letham then completes his evaluation of Moltmann using his carefully

formulated balance, similar to that which Global Missiology and its editor have taken.

Our approach to the doctrine of the Trinity must not overemphasize the one being of God, nor instead the three persons, as Moltmann has done. Instead, we are to proceed from the fact that the triune God is simultaneously one and three, which are equally ultimate. (309)

This balance is his greatest strength yet results in his greatest weakness, in my opinion. He echoes Cornelius Van Til's strongest insight that within the Godhead there exists "the equal ultimacy of the one and many." Van Til also made a mistaken application of this principle. He rejected the law of noncontradiction with respect to the Godhead because he claimed that God is both One Person and Three Persons at the same time. Letham rejects this application but not the principle of equal ultimacy of the one and three (see Letham 2004, 462).

Yet even accepting Van Til's good insight and formally rejecting his error, does not bring Letham, and some other Vantilians such as John Frame and Vern Poythress, to fully embrace the law of noncontradiction. Letham has two sections on the rejection of this law in "physics, mathematics, psychology, and human development" (380) that I find alarming (see Letham 2004, 379-380 and 448). This rejection is leading to postmodern science in which one truth may totally contradict another truth in such things as the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and so forth. Taken to its limit, rejecting logic will destroy Science, Western Civilization, and truth. Other Trinitarian evangelicals agree with my assessment (see www.commonssencescience.com). In actuality, both the ontological and the epistemological laws of noncontradiction are both derived from the

“equal ultimacy of the one and the many”—the Trinitarian foundational axiom,¹ not from Aristotle, Enlightenment philosophy, Descartes, or Newton.²

Yet the Trinitarian axiom, which Van Til rediscovered, remains. It was not unique in church history. The Cappadocian Father, Gregory Nazianzem (Gregory the Theologian)—a scholar John Calvin often quoted as well—used a similar insight. In a Baptismal Oration (Oration 40.41), this Greek church Father surely viewed the Trinity as the equal ultimacy of both the true unity and real, personal diversity within the Godhead. He “oscillates back and forth from the one to the three,” Letham summarizes. “When he considers the one, he is illumined by the splendor of the three. When he distinguishes the three, he is carried back to the one” (379). In this way, Gregory demonstrates the peril of building a trinitarian doctrine “either on the one being of God in isolation or on the three persons (or any one of them) in isolation.” Letham demonstrates this danger often throughout his survey of Church History. He cites several who recently have begun to stress this ancient concept “in a rounded doctrine of the Trinity, there should be equal stress on the one being and the three persons” (Letham 2004, 373).

This is as it should be. True distinction (concrete particularity) eternally exists in perfect harmony together with real unity because within the Godhead a numerically

¹E.g., “I am not you” (the subject-object bifurcation or dichotomy) inescapably reflects the tri-personal relationship within God: the Son is not the Father and so forth. If God were a monistic oneness, there would be no ontological law of non-contradiction because all things would indeed be one. Diversity would be illusory. In addition, “A is not non-A” presupposes a Creator within whom there is truth and goodness. The opposite of truth (“A”) is falsehood (“non-A”). The opposite of goodness is evil.

²Robert Reymond writes in his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*: “Christians believe that their God is rational, that is, that he is logical. This means that he thinks and speaks in a way that indicates that the laws of logic—the law of identity (A is A), the law of noncontradiction (A is not non-A), and the law of the excluded middle (A is either A or non-A)—are laws of thought original with and intrinsic to himself. This means that his knowledge is self-consistent. An because he is a god of truth he will not indeed, he cannot lie (Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Accordingly, just because God is rational, self-consistent, and always and necessarily truthful, we should assume that his inscripturated propositional revelation to us—the Holy Scripture—is of necessity also rational, self-consistent, and true” (Reymond 1998, 109-110).

singular essence eternally exists. Thus both are equally necessary. Neither is logically prior to the other because both are equally ultimate and eternal. This successfully solves the weaknesses of both the Western approach pioneered by Augustine, which presupposes the ultimacy of an unlaying, singular essence out of which comes the three. Hence Western theology has tended toward Modalism, including Karl Barth, Letham points out. The approach of most of the other Eastern Orthodox theologians, however, starts with the three persons. The Monarchy of the personal Father is thus the source, cause, and wellspring of the divinity.

However, starting thus with threeness in isolation from the oneness has a strong tendency to be subordinationist and ultimately, if pressed to its logical conclusion, tritheist, as we have seen in the case of Moltmann (see summary of East-West differences: Letham 2004, 250-251). Actually, the divinity of the Father, Son, and Spirit all equally share an eternal, perichoretic union in the numerical singularity of the common divine essence. In other words, Letham points out correctly, the divinity of the Son and the divinity of the Spirit are not derived from the Father's divinity. Yet, at the same time, the Person of the Son and then of the Spirit in the Son flow eternally out of the Person of the Father in Niceno-Constantinopolitan Trinitarianism. This is deep but not logically contradictory.

Letham's most significant section is his "Definition and Parameters of Trinitarian Teaching" (381). He lists the following four "vital parameters" (Letham 2004, 381) after careful and extensive analysis of the history of Trinitarian teaching in the Eastern and Western churches.³ I add one more concerning the begottenness of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, which he also carefully discusses. For some reason, Letham

leaves out this fifth principle as one of the “vital parameters.” A biblical doctrine of the Trinity must hold each of these in balance. It must not downplay one or another of these parameters or make one or another of the principles logically prior to another. Each parameter must be presupposed at the same time and must be given “equivalent expression” (Letham 2004, 383) for the teaching to remain biblically orthodox and to motivate genuine love within believers.

First is the “The three persons and one Being” of God. Each of the three persons are in themselves the whole God yet do not exhaust all the Godhead. All three together share a singular and numerically identical Being (*homoousios*) with equal value, importance, dignity, glory, and significance. All three together and individually may be worshipped as God. Yet in worshipping one of the Persons, the other two are being worshipped simultaneously because the Spirit draws to the Father through the Son; the Son introduces humanity to the Father by the Spirit; and the Father receives worship through the Word by the Spirit.

Second, is the “The three persons mutually interpenetrate one another in a real, living union.” The teaching of mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) of the three Persons of the Godhead demonstrates that each mutually indwell and intercommune with one another. This mutual indwelling does not destroy the unique particularity of each person. The interpenetrating indwelling is “dynamic” in that there is an eternal and continual “living” relationship among all three in love (Letham 2004, 382).

Third is “The three persons are irreducibly different from one another.” Each of the three Persons is “irreducibly” and eternally distinct from each other though the Three always work inseparably together throughout all eternity. The incarnation demonstrates

³This section heavily depends upon Letham (2004, 381-383).

this principle. Only the Son took upon himself human flesh and will remain the glorified Theanthropos, Jesus the Anointed King, throughout eternity. The Father, Son, and Spirit thus are uniquely different from each other for eternity.

Fourth, is “The eternal begottenness of the Son and eternal procession of the Spirit.” Nicene Christology and Pneumatology has become controversial in certain evangelical and Presbyterian circles today (e.g., Robert Reyburn and John S. Feinberg). Basic to the more recent anti-Nicene arguments is the contention that the word *monogenēs* (*monogenh, j*) in certain key NT passages (e.g., Jn 1:18, 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9; see also Jn 1:14, 3:18) does not mean “only-begotten” but merely “only” or “unique.”

Contemporary arguments also contend that theologically an eternal begotten nature of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit implies a subordinationist position, more akin to Neo-platonism than biblical theology (see Letham 2004, 384, and 384, n. 11 for bibliography of dissent from Nicene Christology).

Letham states that the translation “only-begotten” was virtually universal in the early church. These Fathers were closest to the *koinē* of the NT and ought to know better what it means than do post-Enlightenment scholars. Second, he notes that *monogenēs* is used in the NT in non-Christological passages to mean an only child with the sole right of inheritance because of sharing the nature of the parent (see e.g., Heb 11:1; Lk 7:12, 8:42, 9:38). Likewise, the Person of the eternal Word-Son shares the eternal nature of the Father as the One eternally “begotten out of God” the Father.

Letham then does a careful exegetical study within the Johannine literature of the term and its context, demonstrating to my satisfaction that in each of the contexts

the idea of birth or begetting . . . is pervasive. . . . God's Son . . . is the *monogenēs* from the Father; they [the children by faith] are the children (*tekna*) of God [Jn 1:13]. As God has become the Father of believers in their generation or birth, so the Word stands in relation to the Father as his *monogenēs*. It is his relation to the Father that is in view, not any particular event in his life or in the work of salvation. Moreover, it is impossible to eradicate the idea of begetting from this description. (Letham 2004, 385)

Fifth, "An order exists among the three persons." Having presupposed the above principles, the last must be held at the same time. For eternity, there is an order (*taxis*) among the three. The result is that it is eternally befitting for the Father to be called Father and Monarch-King (see e.g., Dan 4:34; 1 Cor 8:6). It is eternally befitting for the eternal Word-Son, to become incarnate (e.g., Jn 1:1-14,18) and to obey the Father as an eternal Son (e.g., Php 2:5-11). It is eternally befitting for the Spirit, who proceeds "*from the Father in the Son*" (see Letham 2004, 219; emphasis in the original), to glorify the Son and defer to the Father. Therefore the Scripture teaches that all things spring "*from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit*" (Letham 2004, 383; emphasis in original; see e.g., Rom 11:36). In this discussion, I believe that Letham comes up with a suitable confessional compromise that could help heal the division between the Church of the East and of the West:

The Cyrillian phrase *from the Father in the Son* seems to me to express the mutual indwelling of the three, avoids any residual subordination, and also directs us to Jesus' baptism. It also avoids a focus on the Spirit apart from Christ, for we receive the Spirit *in*

Christ. The West's concern for the relation between the Son and the Spirit is maintained, and the confusion for the *filioque* is avoided. The monarchy of the Father is also clear. Moreover, the focus is on the persons, rather than the essence, a move greatly needed so as to avoid the West's tendency to the impersonal. (Letham 2004, 219)

Last, Letham gives a brilliant balance to the contentious debate concerning whether the immanent Trinity is the same as the economic Trinity, revealed to us in Creation and Redemption. In other words, is the immanent (or ontological) Trinity the same as the economic Trinity? Is the economic Trinity, that is the Godhead as he relates to the universe and especially the human world, the exact same as the immanent Trinity? Both are accurate as far as they go but only with some careful qualification and application, Letham points out (see e.g., Letham 2004, 296). Both entail "the unity of the Trinity with the history of salvation and will root it in the experience of that history recorded in the Bible. The distinctiveness of Jesus Christ the Son and of the Holy Spirit in our salvation reflects *real distinctions*" within the eternal unity of the Godhead (Letham 2004, 292, emphasis added).

Therefore, only the Father could send, only the eternal Word could become incarnate, and only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son could represent and reveal both to humans on earth. In other words, the revealed interrelationships of the Persons of the Trinity faithfully and reliably exegete who and what God is in himself (see e.g., Jn 1:18:). "A bifurcation between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity undermines our knowledge of God" (Letham 2004, 296). However, certainly God is not *comprehensively* known because of human finiteness (see e.g., Rom 11:33-34). In this

sense he is incomprehensible. The economic Trinity does not exhaustively reveal the ontological Trinity to mankind. Those who have a propensity in this direction, incline towards collapsing the totality of the economic Trinity into the immanent or ontological Trinity with consequent tendencies toward modalism and pantheism.

If the economic trinity does not reveal accurately some of the ontological trinity, humans would have absolutely no basis to trust him personally or to depend upon his reliability, his purity, goodness, and faithfulness to meet the existential needs of life. Letham correctly points all this out in an excellent section on Karl Rahner.

In his book, Letham masterfully deals with the challenging topic of the Trinity in both a scholarly and personal manner. I greatly appreciated his in-depth attention to crucial, often overlooked issues, and his ability to speak the truth in an upbuilding way.