

Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity:  
The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity*  
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012; xx+231 pages

A part of an ever-growing body of recent literature on the most important doctrine of the Christian Faith, that is, that the true and living God is a triune Being, this comprehensive study by Stephen Holmes, senior lecturer in theology at the University of St. Andrews, is a solid critique of the direction of much of this literature. As Holmes notes, many theologians in the twentieth century, especially in the latter half, believed that the doctrine of the Trinity had been neglected, even lost, and they sought to recover it. As Holmes adeptly shows, though, this recovery by the likes of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and John Zizioulas has given rise to a perspective on the Trinity quite at odds with what had prevailed in Christian thinking and devotion from the patristic era to the end of the eighteenth century. The reason for this Holmes deftly shows to have been the fact that twentieth-century thinkers regarded the patristic understanding of the Trinity, which Christian tradition had assumed to be correct down to the rise of biblical criticism in the eighteenth century, as deeply problematic. The Fathers' insistence on the simplicity and ineffability of the divine being, the fact that the three divine *hypostases* are distinguished by the eternal relations of generation and procession, and that the entirety of Scripture bears witness to the Triune God have basically been ignored by modern writers. And the result, in Holmes' opinion, can hardly be described as a "Trinitarian revival."

Holmes first looks at the biblical witness to the Trinity (p.33-55) and rightly stresses that the Patristic development of the doctrine of the Trinity is "largely a history of biblical exegesis" (p.33). Some of their exegesis seems odd to early twenty-first-century readers, but Holmes helps us make sense of their hermeneutics and also shows why it can be regarded as viable. He then turns to the actual development of the patristic understanding of the Trinity, which rightly occupies a significant amount of his book (p.56–143). Critical to his argument here is his cogent demonstration that there is a unified patristic witness about the Trinity, contra the common, but very wrong, assumption that the Greek Fathers, personified in the Cappadocians, and the Latin Fathers, personified in Augustine, took two very different and conflicting pathways of thought about God.

Chapter 7 looks at the medieval doctrine of the Trinity and the debate over the *filioque* (p.147–164), where Holmes argues that neither position in the latter should be regarded as doing "violence to the received orthodox and catholic tradition" (p.164). While this reviewer personally sees the *filioque* as a correct development, I think Holmes is right in his emphasis here. Chapter 8 (p.165–181) tracks the story from the Reformation to the close of the eighteenth century. The period after the Reformation is often ignored in the history of Trinitarianism, and Holmes' careful, though succinct, attention to this era is very welcome. The final chapter (p.182–200) looks at Trinitarian thought in the last two hundred years—the speculative nature of much of it in the nineteenth century after G.W.F. Hegel and F.D.E. Schleiermacher and then the supposed recovery in the twentieth century.

Has Holmes proven his case? This reviewer thinks so: twentieth-century theologians have clearly regarded the patristic synthesis as deeply problematic and taken thinking about the Trinity in very different directions from the received tradition. If so, what is needed then is a true *ressourcement*, in which the Fathers' thinking on the Trinity is carefully delineated and its significance for the present day cogently argued.

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