

Review of *Simply Trinity* by Matthew Barrett

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Book: Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021)

Introduction

Christianity believes in a triune God, a God who is both three and one. Most of the earliest controversies in the church have been over the doctrine of God, as pastors and theologians wrestle with the notion that there is one God, yet there are three persons who are God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How that is possible is a serious question since it deals with the object of our worship. If we get the doctrine of God wrong, we are not worshipping the true God but a false idol of our own imagination.

In this light, Matthew Barrett, an associate professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has written a book that claims to be all about a recovery of Nicene Orthodoxy on the doctrine of God, and in particular the doctrine of simplicity of the Trinity. Since the Council of Nicaea in 325AD was seen as the high point of orthodoxy concerning the doctrine of God, fighting against the heretic Arius, Nicaea has been appropriated as the symbol of orthodoxy concerning the doctrine of God, although it is certainly not the only neither is it the last council that deals with the Trinity. “Nicene orthodoxy” or the “Nicene faith” has been loaded with the image of an orthodoxy doctrine of God, and Barrett claims to be recovering this high point of orthodoxy in line with what he calls the “Great Tradition,” against supposed modern attempts that attack, assault, and manipulate the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Barrett begins in chapter 1 by narrating his journey towards a more orthodoxy faith. Noting the Bebbington Quadrilateral in page 20, while curiously not using the name, he opines that the Trinity was not one of the points of the Quadrilateral,¹ and uses that as a launchpad unto examples of how the doctrine of the Trinity is being abused today. But how did we get here, Barrett asks. Chapter 2 is dedicated to recounting the history of the early church to Nicaea and to Constantinople at 451AD, narrating the history of the rise of Nicene orthodoxy on the doctrine of God. Chapter 3 shifts to the modern era and shows how the doctrine of the Trinity has come upon hard times. In particular, Protestant Liberalism has abandoned biblical orthodoxy and the Trinity became irrelevant for them (pp. 71-4), since “Christianity is not about dogmas but ethics, not about doctrine but values” (p. 73). In response, social trinitarianism arose which sought to make the Trinity relevant again (pp. 74-86). Lastly, a third group from post-liberalism, or the Yale School,

¹ It is not one of the points of the Bebbington Quadrilateral for the simple reason that both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics hold to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

makes up the “historicizing family” group where their dabbling in narrative theology results in the collapse of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity (p. 88). Barrett finishes off the chapter with the supposed evangelical version of social trinitarianism, which he will deal with in chapter 8 on the issue of EFS (Eternal Functional Subordinationism).

Part 1 of the book is on “how did we drift away.” Part 2 of the book is on “how do we find our way home.” In chapter 4, Barrett deals with certain theological concepts concerning the Trinity, telling us the categories we ought to use when speaking of the Trinity. Chapter 5 is an apologetic defending the doctrine of simplicity in God. Chapters 6 and 7 are about explaining the relation of the Father and the Son, particularly as it relates to paternity and eternal generation, asserting and defending these doctrines of the Godhead. Chapter 8 is where Barrett goes off to attack what he sees as an assault on the faith by fellow Evangelicals, concerning the doctrine of EFS (Eternal Functional Subordination). Chapter 9 deals with the Holy Spirit and the spiration of the Spirit, and chapter 10 deals with the doctrine of inseparable operations of the three persons of the Trinity.

The book is generally a good book in its recounting of history and in its explication of the historic Christian doctrine of God. However, the book has some serious flaws, and it is to these I will now turn to.

The hidden philosophy of Aristotelianism and Thomism

All human thought is formed in the midst of human languages, cultures, and worldviews. It is therefore unavoidable that elements of human philosophy will be used in theology. Human philosophy is of course fallible and not from God, and therefore can never attain to the true knowledge of God. That said, God is pleased to use human philosophy as a tool to aid in theological understanding, and nowhere is this necessary than in the doctrine of God. But as a tool, it must be seen and used as a tool, not as the framework for theology.

It is concerning this that a major concern over Barrett’s work has emerged. While there is nothing wrong with using Platonic or Aristotelian terms and categories, in order for them to be merely tools, we must be flexible in using them or discarding them. Barrett however gives no indication that he is flexible in his usage of Aristotelianism, oftentimes seeming to equate Aristotelian philosophy with the reasoning of Scripture.

As an example of such use of Aristotelian philosophy, Barret writes thus:

He is not a God made up of parts but a God without parts. There is in him no composition, nor can he be compounded by parts. If he could, then he would be a *divided* being (parts are divisible by definition), a *mutable* being (parts are prone to change), a *temporal* being (parts require a composer), and a *dependent* being (depending on these parts as if they precede him). (p. 137)

In this particular argument defending the doctrine of simplicity, Barrett makes the following argument: If God is not simple, then he is divisible, mutable, temporal, and dependent. But is this statement true? We would certainly agree that if God is not simple, then he is divisible, since "divisibility" is opposite of "simplicity." However, I would question what Barrett means by a "divided being." Next, according to Barrett, parts are prone to change, therefore a non-simple God would be mutable. However, why should parts be prone to change? Even in the material world, parts like atoms of hydrogen-1 are not prone to change over millions of years. Accordingly, the protons, neutrons, and electrons of Hydrogen-1 in interstellar space do not change at all over time. Thus, even in the material world, we can see that parts are not necessarily prone to change. Why then would a non-simple God be mutable at all? Obviously, I am not arguing against simplicity here, just showing that the argument here just does not follow. It is possible to believe in immutability and deny simplicity, for the simple fact that parts are not necessarily prone to change or even are mutable in any respect.

Barrett next claims that parts require a composer, and therefore a non-simple God is temporal. That likewise does not follow. Why should parts require a composer? Again, in the material world, if you accept the Big Bang Theory, then atoms come into being spontaneously without a composer. While agreeing that God is the ultimate cause of things, there are many things in the world that are self-organizing from a material point of view. Salt solutions when left to themselves naturally compose themselves into salt crystals, with fixed crystalline structures depending on their chemical composition. There are autocatalytic reactions like the degradation of tin metal into grey tin, or the auto-excision of introns from RNA. Therefore, even things that have parts do not necessarily need a composer. It is possible for parts to auto-organize, and therefore parts do not necessarily require a composer. For a non-simple deity, it is possible to envision such a god being made of self-organizing and eternal parts, thus a non-simple deity is not necessarily temporal.

The last claim made by Barrett is that a non-simple God is dependent on the parts that precede him. Again, this is a non sequitur. Something made of parts could be made of parts because it could be divisible yet started as one whole (the whole is prior to the parts). There is simply no reason why parts must necessarily precede the whole. For example, the human body is made up of parts, yet the human body does not develop as parts which are then composed into the human body. Right from the start as a fetus, the human body develops as a whole. The human body is not like a car assembly line whereby parts are made separately then put together to make a car. Rather, the whole comes prior to the parts, as the parts develop from the whole. In fact, the parts of the human body depend on the whole human body for them to survive. Cut the hand out, and the hand dies while the rest of the body survives. In the case of the human body therefore, the part here is dependent on the whole.

What we have here therefore is an example of how Barrett has hidden Aristotelian premises into his theology. Again, there is nothing necessarily wrong with using Aristotelian categories, but one has to be cognizant of it and recognize the limits of

Aristotelianism. By seemingly adopting Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas wholesale, Barrett has shown that human philosophy is functioning as more than a tool in his theology.

Reductive Western trinitarianism

It was once thought that the Eastern and Western wings of the early catholic church had very different conceptions of the Trinity, where the East focuses on the three persons and the West on the one essence. In his “myth-busting,” Barrett asserts that “this modern paradigm is mistaken, lacking real evidence” (p. 75). In a sense, Barrett is right. There is no **major** difference between East and West in their trinitarian theology, where both East and West teach the three persons and the one essence. However, demolishing this myth does not mean that there are therefore **no significant** differences whatsoever between East and West. Eastern Orthodoxy does begin with the three persons rather than the one essence, even though both East and West confess both. Speaking of the scholasticism of the West, Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan Timothy Kallistos Ware states thus:

Thomas Aquinas ... identify the persons with the relations: *personae sunt ipsae relationes*. Many Orthodox thinkers find this a very meagre idea of personality. The relations, they would say, are not the *persons* – they are the *personal characteristics* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; ...

Latin Scholastic theology, emphasizing as it does the essence at the expense of the persons, comes near to turning God into an abstract idea. He becomes a remote and impersonal being, whose existence has to be proved by metaphysical arguments – a God of the philosophers, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, has been far less concerned than the Latin west to find philosophical proofs of God’s existence: what is important is not that we should argue about the deity, but that we should have a direct and living encounter with a concrete and personal God.²

Eastern Orthodoxy has also developed the concept of a distinction between the essence of God and His energies, most notably by the Eastern church father Gregory Palamas (~14th century AD), which the West does not have. Speaking of this distinction, Palamas writes:

(III.ii.6) ... but also some works of God are without beginning, as the Fathers also rightly affirm. For was it not needful for the work of providence to exist before Creation, so as to cause each of the created things to come to be in time, out of nonbeing? As it not necessary for a divine knowledge to know before choosing, even outside time? But how does it follow that the divine prescience had a

² Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London, UK: Penguin, 1963, 2015), 209

beginning? How could one conceive of a beginning of God's self-contemplation, and was there ever a moment when God began to be moved toward contemplation of Himself? Never!³

These works of God, then, are manifestly unoriginated and pre-temporal: His foreknowledge, will, providence, contemplation of Himself, and whatever powers are akin to these. But if this contemplation, prescience, predetermination and will are works of God that are without beginning, then virtue is also unoriginated, for each of His works is a virtue; ...⁴

(III.ii.8) But even if this man considers that everything that has a beginning is created, we for our part know that while all the energies of God are uncreated, not all are without beginning. Indeed, beginning and end must be ascribed, if not to the creative power itself, then at least to its activity, that is to say, to its energy as directed towards created things.⁵

The energies of God are not of the being of God, and are not of what we traditionally consider the works of God, since the energies of God are uncreated ("manifestly unoriginated"). Palamas used the essence-energies distinction so that God can be said to be able to communicate with mankind, as otherwise Neoplatonism makes God totally unknowable and uncommunicable.⁶ We note here that Palamas' move proves that there is a social aspect in the East concerning communication with the three persons of the Trinity, something Barrett denies to be the case.

The focus on the three persons and relating to the three persons means that, in terms of Trinitarian theology and relating to the Godhead, Western theology has been relatively impoverished by comparison, and thus the "Great Tradition" that Barrett seems to cherish, in which he claims that on the Trinity, "you cannot improve on Thomas" (p. 143), is not that great after all, and most certainly Thomas can be improved on. Gregory Palamas is already a better trinitarian theologian than Thomas Aquinas ever was or would be!

All of this impoverished Western theology on the Trinity comes to a head in the chart on page 115 supposedly depicting the immanent and economic Trinity. The immanent Trinity refers to the being of God, and the economic Trinity refers to the works of God. Yet, if there is a distinction between the essence and the energies of God, and both are distinct from the works of God, then the two categories of immanent and economic are deficient. Either we encompass the energies of God under the category of the economic Trinity

³ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* (The Classics of Western Spirituality; Ed. John Meyendorff; trans. Nicholas Gendle; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 94

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96

⁶ John Meyendorff, "Introduction," in Palamas, 20.

(something which I have done often), or we have to create a different category corresponding to the divine energies.

The amended chart based upon the Palamite doctrine (with the immanent and economic categories unchanged) could be something like this:

Immanent	Economic - Energies	Economic – Works
<i>Opera ad intra</i> Internal operations	<i>Opera ad extra</i> Uncreated workings	<i>Opera ad extra</i> External operations or missions
Triune God in and of himself	Triune God in relation of the persons to each other and towards the world	Triune God in relation to created order
The eternal life of the triune God	The eternal life of the triune God in its interpersonal relations to each other and overflow towards the creation	The triune God's acts in history: creation, providence, and redemption
Cannot be exhausted by the economic	Reflects the immanent and is the blueprint for the economic	Reveals something true about immanent but does not exhaust immanent
The hidden depths of God; known in its fullness by the Trinity alone	The part of the inner life of God that is revealed to the people of God	Revealed to creatures by the triune God's mighty acts and words

Far from promoting a great tradition where Thomas Aquinas is someone that cannot be improved on, Barrett is promoting an impoverished classical theism that tends towards abstract depersonalized persons.

The misrepresentation of opponents, particularly EFS

In chapter 8, Barrett attacked EFS (Eternal Functional Subordination) with vehemence. The main thing that needs to be asked prior to evaluating his arguments is whether Barrett has correctly represented the doctrine of EFS. After all, there is no point in writing even a hundred pages or even thousands of pages of rebuttals if one misrepresents one's opponents. The sad reality is that Barrett has totally misrepresented EFS. Since the misrepresentations are endemic and ubiquitous throughout the entire chapter, where Barrett mediates the worst of the 2016 EFS controversy in his strident attacks upon the doctrine, I have created a separate analysis of Barrett on the topic of EFS.⁷

⁷ Daniel H. Chew, *Contra Barrett on the Issue of EFS: A Critique of Chapter 8 of Simply Trinity*, accessed <http://puritanreformed.net/theology/ContraBarrettEFS.pdf> (June 5, 2022)

The main things from the analysis that must be said is that Barrett misrepresents his sources, read his sources uncharitably, and continues to read Aristotelian philosophy into EFS instead of allowing EFS to define itself on its own terms. EFS is not contrary to the Nicene faith but is rather extra-Nicene.

Conclusion

What then can we say about Barrett's book? On the one hand, Barrett masterfully retells the history of Nicene orthodoxy, and helpfully shows us how Nicene orthodoxy has expressed the orthodox doctrine of God. On the other, it is beset with unreflective Aristotelianism, with a reductive Western trinitarianism, and with a misrepresentation of opponents especially on the topic of EFS, which he attacks viciously as heresy.

While the good parts of the book are indeed a retrieval of Nicene orthodoxy, the bad parts severely outweigh the good. Whatever its good intentions, Barrett's book serve more as polemics to retrieve classical theism and less as actual intellectual engagement with critics of classical theism. It preaches mostly to the already converted Thomists, most of whom are just as naïve and ignorant of the true diversity of opinions on the Trinity as Barrett seem to be. But if someone truly wants to know more about the Trinity, Barrett's book is not the book to get. Even for someone who wants to know more about the "Great Tradition," go read Thomas Aquinas to be sure, but read Thomas and read Palamas as well.

Thus, to those who are truly interested in the truth of who God is, I will tell them of Barrett's path: *Don't go there. This is not the way of truth, but of factions and ignorance. This is not the biblical way of viewing church traditions, but the Roman Catholic way of de facto canonizing of Saint Thomas Aquinas.* Reformed Christians who believe in *Sola Scriptura* cherish tradition but are not bound by them, whereas the new classical theists as exemplified by Matthew Barrett are bound by the philosophy tradition of Saint Thomas Aquinas as much as Scripture, effectively becoming Tradition 2 (both Scripture and tradition as authoritative) followers.