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A personal response to Stephen R. Holmes

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Kevin Giles is an Australian pastor and theologian who has published three books and many articles on the doctrine of the Trinity.

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I am delighted to be invited to make a personal response to Stephen Holmes's book on the Trinity. I liked it so much that when I saw what I thought was a second book by him published by IVP Academic instead of Paternoster, I ordered a copy only to find it was the same book with another title! The book is very well written, the explanations of the key ideas of the great trinitarian theologians are excellent, the breadth of reading is impressive and the coverage of the two thousand years of thought on the Trinity is wonderful.

The primary thesis of the book is that much twentieth-century work on the Trinity has been in large measure a departure from the historical understanding of the Trinity, especially as enunciated by the Nicene fathers, including Augustine. Too many modern theologians writing on the Trinity, Stephen believes,[1] have not mastered the received doctrinal tradition and so they misunderstand it or distorted it unknowingly, and what is offered raises more problems than answers. He writes to affirm the great treasures of the Nicene tradition, advocating its importance at this present time. For him, rather than the huge volume of work done on the Trinity in the last fifty years indicating a 'recovery' of the historic doctrine of the Trinity, and a big step forward in understanding it, he believes much of it has been a big step backward.[2]

I think this book is a masterly introduction to the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Here we find an encyclopaedic coverage of two thousand years of thought on the Trinity, deep and profound reflection on this difficult doctrine, and a strong re-affirmation of Nicene trinitarian orthodoxy that allows for no confusing of the divine persons or the dividing of them by hierarchically ordering them or by depicting them almost as individuals, each with their own will and consciousness. I commend Stephen also for rejecting the common thesis today that the Trinity prescribes a social agenda.

If this is all I said in making a response to Stephen's book it would be a boring article. It would raise no questions to think about. I therefore go on to mention a few details in his book that I would question and to raise three more significant issues that I personally wish that he might have considered.

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1 I take the liberty in this essay of addressing Dr Holmes as 'Stephen'. I am an Australian; this is my excuse! To speak of 'Holmes' seems to me to be a very impersonal way to address a brother Christian. I wrote to him asking permission to do so.

2 Editor's note: it was at this point that Kevin provided his summary of the book that has been appropriated for the introduction to this issue.

I. Details I would question

In a book of this length and scope it is easy to miss something, at a few points express what you are trying to say poorly, or make a cosmetic mistake here or there.[3] On the six examples I raise in Stephen's work, I do so with hesitation because he may respond by pointing out that it is I who has got it wrong.

First, Stephen says the AD 325 'Creed of Nicea stops short of affirming eternal generation'.[4] It is true that this creed does not explicitly speak of the Son's begetting as 'eternal' as does the AD 381 Creed. However, I think the addition of the word 'eternal' only makes explicit what is implied in the AD 325 creed. This speaks of Jesus Christ as

> *begotten* from the Father, uniquely (*monogenes*), that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, *begotten* not made, of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.

If the Son is uniquely begotten from the eternal being of the Father and he is 'God from God' 'not created' and is one in being with the Father, what more needs to be said? The Son is definitely not a creature created in time, as Arius taught. Why this creed has the Son begotten from the Father's *ousia*/being, whereas the AD 381 text has him begotten 'of the Father', is debated and uncertain. Both ideas are perfectly acceptable.

Second, I do not think that in his *Discourses Against the Arians* Athanasius limits his differentiating of the Father and the Son to asserting that one is Father and one is Son, as Stephen says.[5] The eternal generation of the Son is one of the most important theological doctrines that Athanasius develops in opposition to Arius, who spoke of the Son as created in time. This doctrine was for Athanasius the lynchpin that held together divine oneness in being and eternal self-differentiation. For him, the Father is unbegotten God, the Son is begotten God. I give but one quote to substantiate my claim that Athanasius grounds the Father-Son distinction on their differing origination in eternity but many references could be given. He says: 'one is Father, and the other Son; one begets, the other is begotten'.[6] I note, however, that later in his book Stephen says that for all the Nicene fathers, 'the three *hypostases* are distinguished by eternal relations of origin, begetting and proceeding – and not otherwise'.[7]

Third, one of the most important of the many breathtakingly innovative theological insights of the great Athanasius was his argument that to read the

3 I am sure my far less informed and far less well-written writings on the Trinity would give innumerable examples of such slips.

4 Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 87.

5 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 92.

6 Athanasius, 'Discourses Against the Arians', in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1892), 4, 4.24 (443); cf. 1.1.14 (314), 1.1.16 (316), 1.9.31 (325), etc. (Henceforth abbreviated as *NPNF* with the volume number, reference and page number in brackets following.)

7 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 146.

Bible rightly on the Son we must recognise that there is 'a double account of the saviour' in scripture, one as man in 'the form of a servant' and one as God in all might, majesty and power, a hermeneutical principle he found suggested in John 1:1–18 and Philippians 2:4–11.[8] Stephen does not mention this in his discussion of Athanasius,[9] and would seem to suggest this hermeneutic was developed by Gregory of Nazianzus.[10]

Fourth, I thought it was an omission in discussing the *filioque*[11] not to mention the Orthodox-Reformed agreed statement on the Trinity in general, and on the *filioque* clause in particular (negotiated by T. F. Torrance), which is so significant.[12]

Fifth, I also thought that at least a brief comment on the very important work on the Trinity by T. F. Torrance would have been good. What is distinctive and exciting about Torrance's work is that he digs deeply into the Greek patristic tradition and finds missed jewels that can enrich the contemporary articulation of this doctrine.

Sixth and finally, I thought that Stephen's outline of Charles Hodge's exposition of the Trinity was over generous. For Hodge three 'essential facts' sum up the doctrine of the Trinity: 'unity of essence, distinction of persons, and subordination'.[13] At least thirteen times he speaks of, 'the principle of subordination of the Son to the Father, and the Spirit to the Father and the Son',[14] which is hierarchical ordering in the Trinity. This subordination, for Hodge, is not in the economy alone as the Nicene tradition, but in 'the mode of subsistence and operation of the persons'.[15] He even speaks of the Son as 'inferior in rank'.[16]

II. And now to three bigger issues.

Stephen's book is wide ranging but I was disappointed not to find, firstly, a more positive evaluation of the Nicene fathers' interpretative work, secondly, any concession that some twentieth-century trinitarian theology has enriched and added to the Nicene faith, and thirdly, no mention at all of the many books by evangelicals that argue for the eternal subordination of the Son and for the abandonment of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, in direct opposition to the Nicene faith.

8 Athanasius, 'Against the Arians', *NPNF*, 4, 3.26.29 (409).
9 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 87–92.
10 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 113.
11 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 144–64.
12 See T. F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994), 115–22.
13 C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 467.
14 Ibid., 460. See also 445, 461, 462, 464, 465, 467, 468, and 474.
15 Ibid., 445, 461.
16 Ibid., 469.

II.1 The Nicene fathers and scripture

In summarising Stephen's well researched chapter 2,[17] where he criticises the Nicene fathers' exegetical work and explores what in scripture led to the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, I commend him for both the breadth of his reading on biblical interpretation and his brief summary of the New Testament data that is the ground and basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. I must admit, however, I was a little disappointed with this chapter. To begin with, I find his argument somewhat convoluted. Stephen argues both that 'the exegesis of the church fathers' is 'obscure, unconvincing and seemingly arbitrary to the modern mind',[18] even 'contradictory',[19] and that 'there is a remarkable level of continuity in the exegetical appeals made by developers and defenders of Trinitarian doctrine from the patristic period down to (conservative) defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity today'.[20] Can we affirm both conclusions?

More importantly, I think that in focusing on the limitations of the Nicene fathers' exegesis Stephen fails to note the great inheritance they bequeathed to the church in their pioneering work in showing how the scriptures are to be read in the 'doing' of theology. We need to thank Athanasius most of all for this bequest, but Augustine's contribution is also important. Athanasius's great challenge was that the Arians had one proof text that seemed to endorse exactly what they were teaching, Proverbs 8:22, 'The lord created (*ktizo*) me at the beginning of his works' and numerous texts that spoke of the Son as 'sent' by the Father, praying to the Father, doing the will of the Father, confessing his ignorance of some things and getting tired, all of which for them suggested that the Son was not God in the same way as God the Father. He was God in second degree, created God. Much of Athanasius's *Discourses Against the Arians* are given to offering an alternative interpretation of the texts of scripture Arius quotes in support of his theology.

Athanasius does not dispute Arius's appeal to Old Testament texts that the New Testament authors read christologically; he only disputes his interpretation of them. Arius and Athanasius assume that the Old Testament speaks prophetically of Christ. Paul and the other New Testament writers also believed this!

Athanasius sees clearly that there must be something wrong with how Arius was interpreting the Bible, despite all the texts he quoted in support of his views, because what he concluded undermined the full divinity of Christ, something clearly taught in and fundamental to scripture. In answer to Arius's 'proof-texting' approach, Athanasius put forward three principles or rules on how to do theology by appeal to scripture that were endorsed virtually by all theologians after him until they were forgotten in modern times when the critical and historical reading of scripture eclipsed them. When the scriptures can only be

17 Now part of the editorial introduction to this issue.
18 Holmes, *Holy Trinity*, 33.
19 Ibid., 47.
20 Ibid., 51.

interpreted critically and historically, which emphasises diversity in scripture, how one does theology becomes very problematic, especially for evangelicals. We contemporary evangelicals have much to learn from Athanasius on how to do theology by appeal to scripture.

First, Athanasius was convinced that Arius's reading of scripture could not be right because his conclusions were contrary to what 'the bishops who preceded us and our first catechising' had taught on the full divinity of Jesus Christ, teaching that he calls 'the tradition of the fathers'.[21] After the council of Nicea in AD 325, this 'tradition' was summed up in creed of Nicea. Athanasius was firmly convinced that the right starting point for the theological interpretation of scripture was what the church had come to believe, which was what scripture taught read holistically. Weinandy says, 'Athanasius opposed Arius, and those who later held similar positions, precisely because he was convinced that they interpreted scripture apart from the ecclesial tradition. Theirs was a private and personal, and thus idiosyncratic, interpretation of scripture.'[22]

Athanasius's appeal to 'the tradition of the fathers', was not an appeal to a body of teaching separate to scripture but to how others he highly respected before him had interpreted scripture. For him, this kind of tradition prescribing how to rightly read scripture was authoritative. This he contrasted with 'the traditions of men',[23] teaching without scriptural support or worse, contrary to scripture, which he denigrated.

Second, Athanasius recognised that in scripture there is much diversity of teaching and there are isolated texts that seem to contradict what the rest of scripture affirms. To grasp the right meaning of any individual text, he argued, the whole 'scope' of scripture had to be kept in view.[24] He argued in effect that no one text or even two or three should ever be interpreted to contradict what was plain in all of scripture.

Third, Athanasius argued that in seeking theological coherence in the diverse teaching of scripture, often a hermeneutical rule suggested by scripture is demanded. This he argued was certainly the case with what the Bible says about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In holy scripture there is 'a double account of the Saviour; that he was ever God and is the Son, being the Father's Logos and Radiance and Wisdom; and that afterwards for us he took the flesh of a virgin.'[25] This 'double account' of the Saviour, is most clearly enunciated in John 1:1–18, and Philippians 2:4–11 (as already mentioned). Once this 'double account' hermeneutic is embraced, Athanasius concluded, the scriptures can be seen to be giving consistent teaching on the Son. The texts that speak of the Son in all might,

21 *NPNF*, 4, *Council of Nicea*, 1.2 and note 3 (75). See also *NPNF*, 4, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 1.3.8 (310).
22 T. G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 135.
23 *NPNF*, 4, *Letter 2, Easter 330*, 5 (511and following).
24 *NPNF*, 4, *Discourses,* 3.26.26-29 (409).
25 *NPNF*, 4, *Discourses,* 3.26.26-29 (409).

majesty and power speak of him as God. The texts that speak of him as praying to the Father, doing the will of the Father, obeying the Father and as ignorant of some things speak of him as God in the 'form of a servant', in his earthly ministry for our salvation.

Augustine follows Athanasius closely, calling these principles 'canonical rules'. Where the exegesis of texts by the Nicene fathers is inadequate we can do better. The critical and historical study of scripture definitely helps us grasp more accurately what the authors were trying to say. My argument is that to focus on the inadequacies of some of their exegesis is to miss the point that they pioneered a way of reading scripture theologically that is as much needed today as it was in the fourth century.

II.2 A more positive evaluation of some developments in twentieth-century trinitarian theology

I thoroughly agree with Stephen that the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is definitive and should not be undermined but this is not to say it cannot be reworded, refined and even conceptually improved subsequently, especially in changed cultural and historical contexts. I accept Stephen's very trenchant criticism of a number of innovative twentieth-century formulations of the Trinity but I nevertheless think some positive advances have been made. The way the Nicene fathers conceived the Trinity undeniably reflects in some measure a fourth-century world in which Greek philosophy and terminology prevailed and other cultural norms foreign to us were assumed. Must our modern, even post-modern, articulation of the Trinity be limited to what was articulated in the fourth-century? I think not. I believe in fact we may be able to speak of the Trinity in ways today that are more in line with biblical thinking than the Greek and Latin fathers. I could speak of where I think Barth has made objective advances in trinitarian theology but I will take up two other matters that excite me more.

From the time of Augustine it has been recognised that to speak of the divine three as 'persons' is problematic. Stephen notes how both Barth and Rahner avoided this term. The use of the word 'person' in trinitarian grammar is questioned because we tend to think of a person as an individual with their own mind, will and consciousness. This is how radical social trinitarians often speak of the divine persons and so border on tritheism. In modern times, the case has been put that a person is someone in relation to others and that self-identity is found in these relations. This understanding of what constitutes personhood is wonderfully evocative in thinking about what constitutes the divine persons. They are the one God in threefold relationship, each finding their personal identity by and in this threefold relationship. I for one think this is a better way to think of a divine person. It is a positive step forward in trinitarian theology.

Closely allied with this development is the argument that rather than thinking of divine unity in philosophical terms as a *oneness in being*, it is better to think of divine unity in terms of 'being in community'. This images divine unity as dynamic, interpersonal and communal. I think this too is an objective improvement in how we may understand divine life.

Stephen is very critical of the social trinitarians, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Boff, and Volf (and there are many others), and I basically agree with him. Their construal of the Trinity is novel and borders on tritheism. I also agree with him that their thesis that the Trinity prescribes a social agenda on earth is novel and untenable. What I would want to add is that today there are three competing ways of trying to explain what constitutes divine unity. First, we have the classic Nicene model that grounds divine unity in *oneness of being*. Second, we have the social model which grounds divine unity in the doctrine of *perichoresis*, mutual indwelling. And third, we have communal models of divine unity such as those spelt out by Zizioulas and more helpfully by T. F. Torrance. This grounds divine unity in a communion of being, as we have just noted.

II.3 The omission of any comment on the rejection of Nicene orthodoxy by some contemporary evangelical theologians

I now come to my own hobby horse. I am continually on the lookout for a book by a competent trinitarian scholar that comments on and discusses the now very popular evangelical hierarchical construal of the doctrine of the Trinity, with a conservative gender-orientated social agenda, which is often associated with a rejection of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Again I was disappointed. Stephen is silent on this matter. Nothing in his book gives any support to these ideas, much of what he says categorically excludes such teaching because it is clearly contrary to the Nicene faith, and yet it is not mentioned even in passing.

This widespread evangelical departure from the Nicene faith is a matter of huge importance. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* has sold about 350,000 copies,[26] and this is only one of many books by leading conservative evangelical theologians that promulgate this non-Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Grudem's large tome is mainly bought by clergy and almost every evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal theological student has a copy of this book. The readership of most of the books Stephen mentions pale into insignificance when compared with the sales of Grudem's *Theology*, a book he does not mention.

The best theologians in the church today need to address this dangerous development that is now so widespread in evangelical circles. Evangelicals who promulgate this doctrine say they are only endorsing the eternal subordination in 'role' or 'function', not the ontological subordination of the Son. They are teaching historic orthodoxy. The problem is that this role or functional subordination of the Son, which in plain speech always indicates a belief in the Son's *eternal subordination in authority* to the Father and nothing else, is that

26 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, revised edition 2000). In my *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) I give a full bibliography of the many evangelical theologians promulgating this doctrine. For recent particularly egregious examples of this teaching and replies to it, see *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, ed. by D. W. Jowers and H. W. House (Oregon: Pickwick, 2012).

it is eternal, necessary and immutably person-defining. It is thus ontological. It speaks of who the Son *is,* not just how he functions in the economy. This doctrine of the Trinity is undeniably a hierarchical one, and this term is often used in this literature. The Father has the commanding 'role' and the Son the obeying 'role' and this can never change. Most discussions on fourth-century Arianism in its differing expressions conclude that hierarchical ordering or ranking in divine life was the essence of this error and most of the definitions of the modern term, 'subordinationism' in dictionaries of theology and in theological texts say hierarchical ordering or ranking in divine life is the essence of this error. To argue that the divine three persons are ranked or ordered hierarchically in any way is a denial of the Nicene faith. The Athanasian Creed says, 'in this Trinity none is before or after; none is greater or less than another', the three persons are 'co-equal'.

What is more, to make the doctrine of the Trinity the basis and ground for a social agenda is also a departure from Nicene orthodoxy. Stephen is right to criticise Catholic and mainline Protestant social trinitarians for arguing that three co-equal divine persons prescribe social equality on earth and *mutatis mutandis* this criticism must apply to the evangelicals who argue for the permanent subordination of women on the basis of the eternal subordination of the Son. In Nicene orthodoxy the Trinity is our Christian doctrine of God not our social agenda. What is needed is for those (like Stephen) who believe that the Nicene faith prescribes orthodoxy to call for a moratorium on appeals to the Trinity as the ground and basis for either the equality of the sexes or the hierarchal ordering of the sexes.[27]

And thirdly, to advocate the abandonment of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is without question a blatant breach with the Nicene faith. To ask that two lines from the Nicene Creed that undergird the full divinity of the Son be deleted is to part company with the catholic faith. It is to deny a doctrine clearly taught in both the Nicene and Athanasian creeds and all the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions of faith and supported by almost every theologian of note, including Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth and Torrance. To reply that our authority as evangelicals is the Bible not the creeds or confessions is particularly worrying. These documents are what the church has agreed to be what the Bible teaches.

I certainly think that to omit any discussion of this widespread development in evangelical theology is a serious omission.

I conclude, Stephen Holmes book, *The Holy Trinity* is a very good read and part of its strength is that it opens up many questions for discussion and comment. I look forward to hearing what Stephen says to me in reply.

27 The idea that the Trinity prescribes the male-female relationship was invented by evangelicals who were arguing for the permanent subordination of women in the 1970s and has been promulgated almost entirely by them. Egalitarians have as a general rule not appealed to the Trinity as an argument for equality. I have not done this in my three books putting the biblical case for equality.