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by Samuel G. Parkison

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Abstract: This brief essay is a response to Andrew Hollingsworth's article, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism: Problems with a Recent Attempt." In his article, Hollingsworth canvases Matthew Barrett's third chapter in Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit, which surveys the recent history of social trinitarianism, describing its major figures and their divergence (or, "drift") from the historic and orthodox trinitarianism of Nicaea. Hollingsworth argues that Barrett's critique fails on account of (a) inadequate engagement with the proponents of social trinitarianism he names, (b) an inadequate definition of social trinitarianism, and (c) inadequate justification for his presuppositions regarding the relative authority of tradition on hermeneutics and dogmatics. In this essay, I will argue that each of these criticisms fail when we consider (a) the nature of Simply Trinity, (b) Simply Trinity's third chapter in the context of the book as a whole, and (c) the way tradition has functioned—and continues to function—for the faithful orthodox throughout history. This latter contextual consideration challenges where Hollingsworth presumes the burden of proof lies regarding a Protestant adoption of Nicene orthodoxy in light of sola scriptura.

Key Terms: Doctrine of the Trinity, Social Trinitarianism, Trinity Models, Classical Theism, Tradition, Matthew Barrett, Sola Scriptura, Andrew Hollingsworth

Introduction

Andrew Hollingsworth has paid Matthew Barrett a great compliment in his article, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism: Problems with a Recent Attempt,"[1] which

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1. Andrew Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism: Problems with a Recent Attempt," *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 7.2 (2023): 195-213.

interacts at great length with Barrett's book, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*.[2] Hollingsworth renders his compliment simply by virtue of respecting Barrett enough to carefully read his work and engage it with vigor. Such an article, in my estimation (and in the estimation of the *JBTS* editors), deserves attention. This brief essay will serve as a response to Hollingsworth's article. I do not pretend to be exhaustive in my response; I hope rather to be broad without being reductionistic. We begin with intent. The best paragraph of his article is the first one. I do not say this to denigrate the rest of Hollingsworth's article, of course, but simply to praise what he says about the importance of right-minded theological debate: "Christians are called to be both critical *and* charitable," says Hollingsworth, "and Christians can only be truly critical when they have accurately and charitably presented the view under discretion. Theological beliefs, especially those articulated and defended by others who aim to be faithful to Scripture and the Christian faith, should always be articulated accurately, critiqued rightly, and judged charitably."[3] I could not agree more with these comments. Hollingsworth provides his introductory paragraph as a rationale for his engagement with Barrett, and I refer to it here as a rationale for my engagement with Hollingsworth.

As the title of his article suggests, Hollingsworth is not concerned with all aspects of *Simply Trinity*, but rather those parts of the book wherein social trinitarianism (ST) fall under Barrett's criticism. The main burden of his article is to argue that Barrett's critiques of ST fall short. There are many issues Hollingsworth raises in his article worth extensive attention. Unfortunately, the most interesting (and, I would say, most *important*) issues he raises occupy the least amount of space in his piece. I am thinking particularly of the question regarding the Christian tradition's role in hermeneutics and theological methodology, as well as the question of what it looks like to meaningfully affirm *sola scriptura*—these concerns Hollingsworth raises toward the end of his piece, and are by no means the primary burden of his paper. So, while I am most interested in these issues, it is incumbent upon me to first sort out Hollingsworth's earlier and primary criticisms of Barrett's work, which are that Barrett's critique of ST fails on account of (a) inadequate engagement with the proponents of ST he names, (b) an inadequate definition of ST, and (c) inadequate justification for his presuppositions regarding the relative authority of tradition.

Hollingsworth's Summary of *Simply Trinity*

To begin, I would like to address Hollingsworth's assessment of Barrett's work. The first half of his article, wherein he simply summarizes the content of Barrett's third chapter in *Simply Trinity*, is good. Hollingsworth does a fine job at restating

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

3. Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 195.

the central claim of this chapter, which is that ST represents a departure from the traditional orthodox understanding of the Trinity—what Barrett calls "Trinity drift." So, in terms of the initial work of canvasing the layout of the chapter in question, there is little to say: Hollingsworth ably portrays Barrett's concerns. But what of his critical engagement with the content of *Simply Trinity's* third chapter? Sadly, in failing to adequately situate this chapter within the book as a whole contextually, Hollingsworth begins to falter.

If my students remember anything about my feedback on their work, it is likely my golden rule for book reviews: *critique the book you are reading, not the book you wish you had read.* In other words, a good book review should not critique a book for falling short of achieving a goal it was never intended to meet (even if the reader *wishes* it had); this is not a mark against it, and should not be treated as if it were. To keep from breaking the golden rule in this case, we need to bear in mind what chapter 3 is doing in *Simply Trinity*, and what the project, as a whole, is after. Though *Simply Trinity* contains polemical sections throughout (not the least of which is the chapter in question), our assessment will be amiss from the very beginning if we do not bear in mind that this book is a positive proposal before it is anything else. To state the matter plainly, *Simply Trinity* is not primarily a polemic against ST; this is a secondary feature in service to the primary one, which is *the commendation of Nicene trinitarianism*. From the opening chapter to the conclusion, Barrett makes this primary purpose clear. He does not merely want for his readers to avoid becoming social trinitarians, he wants for them to become Nicene-affirming trinitarians.

This has important implications for the role of *Simply Trinity's* third chapter. To focus exclusively on a secondary point is not *necessarily* a problem. But prerequisite the ability to analyze the secondary point accurately is the recognition of its service to the primary one. Treating the secondary point of a work as if it were its primary point is to fail to treat it with accuracy. If the book is a constructive work that requires some justification, chapter 3 explains why such a justification is required. The heart of the book is in the later chapters, which Hollingsworth does not mention. Of course, as just mentioned, Hollingsworth's lack of interaction with those chapters is not a problem by default. In this case, however, Hollingsworth's silence about the work as a whole bespeaks a problem with the sections he *does* interact with. At times, he treats *Simply Trinity* as if it were an academic treatise, aimed at social trinitarians with the purpose of debate and persuasion, instead of what it actually is: an introduction to the classical doctrine of the Trinity for a lay audience.

Criticism-Misfires

We may understand Barrett's survey of ST in chapter 3 *of Simply Trinity* as a kind of pre-emptive answer to the question the latter portions of the book—those portions close to the heart of his project—will inevitably raise for the average reader:

"Why does *this* way of thinking about the Trinity feel so strange? Why is Barrett's description of the Trinity so different from the typical way we talk about the Trinity today?" The answer that chapter 3 provides us with is something to the effect of, "*This*, the way this book talks about the Trinity, historically speaking, *is* the 'typical' way of talking about the Trinity. What we are used to is the exception to the rule. Our norm is the historic oddity. Let me tell you how we arrived to this place, where what was normal for countless Christians throughout the ages has become unfamiliar: *Trinity drift*." The brief survey of ST in chapter 3 is merely the ground-clearing work for the constructive work that is the central goal of *Simply Trinity*.

This is precisely where Hollingsworth breaks the golden rule I describe above. Hollingsworth continually faults Barrett for his minimal engagement with the social trinitarians he names (i.e., Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff, Hans Frei, J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, etc.). Hollingsworth writes, "Nowhere does he engage with the numerous critiques of classical trinitarianism that appear in the contemporary philosophical or theological literature, such as those offered by William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburn, William Hasker, or others."[4] Granted, if Barrett were writing a book that proposed to definitively debunk ST in a scholarly manner, this criticism would hold serious weight. For such a book, the amount of attention Barrett gives to these figures would be nothing short of negligible. But that is *not* the book that Barrett wrote. Hollingsworth appears to miss this crucial point when he concludes, "Simply put, this is unacceptable on scholarly standards."[5] To which we might reply, "This is quite right, and entirely beside the point." Such a comment is akin to reading a short piece in the opinions column of a newspaper and saying, "this is unacceptable on investigative journalism standards."

In a trade-level book that is already over three hundred pages long (possibly *too* long for a trade-level book in the estimation of some), and which does not advertise itself *primarily* as a criticism of ST, Hollingsworth faults Barrett for surveying ST rather than delving deep into the works of its individual figures. It seems that for *Simply Trinity* to meet Hollingsworth's expectation for adequate engagement with these figures, Barrett would have been required not only to write a different book, but indeed, a different *kind* of book. There simply is no room for the kind of engagement Hollingsworth is asking for here in a trade-level book that is not even written to be a full-fledged survey and critique of ST. The kind of engagement he is looking for here would actually be *inappropriate* for *Simply Trinity,* given its genre and central thrust—it would be a profound distraction and entirely ineffective at reaching its readership. (Those with publishing experience will note: no trade-level publisher would publish the type of book Hollingsworth demands; the fact that Baker Books published three hundred and sixty-four pages on a subject as difficult as classical trinitarianism is remarkable). Hollingsworth's criticism on this front nearly amounts

4.   Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 209.
5.   Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 209.

to the delegitimization of surveys and summaries. Is there any place for popular-level summaries of theology and its historical development in service to another goal? Should Baker abandon its "BakerBooks" imprint and stick exclusively to "Baker Academic"?[6]

The above, however, is not Hollingsworth's primary objection to Barrett. Rather, he is most concerned with Barrett's definition of ST. According to Hollingsworth, Barrett's definition "requires too many necessary conditions to be met for a particular Trinity doctrine to be considered ST."[7] Hollingsworth worries that Barrett is forced to place into the same category figures who differ in significant degrees, such that their differences are not given their proper due. The definition Hollingsworth interacts with is found in the glossary at the end of *Simply Trinity*, and it is also laid out in neat, itemized fashion within the book itself.[8] Hollingsworth is quick to point out Barrett's forthrightness regarding the notorious difficulty of defining ST: it is like trying to "nail Jell-O to the wall." Indeed, Barrett's explicit definition *begins* on this note of diversity: "Social trinitarianism is diverse, and some versions are more radical than others, but most hold some or all of the following eight marks in common."[9] Here are those marks,

> (1) Starting point is not simplicity, but three persons… (2) Trinity is redefined as a society and community… (3) Persons are redefined as three centers of consciousness and will, (4) Persons are redefined according to their relation*ships*… (5) Unity is redefined as interpersonal relationships of love between persons… (6) Large overlap (sometimes collapse) of immanent and economic Trinity, (7) Sets East over West… (8) Social Trinity is a paradigm for social theory.[10]

Again, Barrett qualifies that not every form of ST can be characterized by every one of these marks; he writes in general terms here. Hollingsworth grants that Barrett makes this qualification one moment, but he appears to ignore it the next. For example, he gives great attention to the fact that some social trinitarians—such as Thomas H. McCall, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland—lack many of the

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6. Hollingsworth is not only mistaken about the type of book Barrett has written, but he misses the point of Barrett's "survey" as well. Theologians in the last century thought they experienced a renaissance, but in truth they became enamored with a different (social) trinity altogether. This is an observation made not only by Barrett but by Lewis Ayres in *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009). Chapter 3 of *Simply Trinity,* therefore, is not a "survey" per se but a look at our recent past to wake us up so that we do not think social trinitarianism *is* Nicene trinitarianism. To miss the purpose of chapter 3 with such a criticism is like reading Stephen Holmes' book *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2012) and thinking he is merely giving a historical "survey."

7. Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 205.

8. *Simply Trinity*, 86.

9. *Simply Trinity,* 86.

10. *Simply Trinity*, 86.

eight marks in Barrett's definition. But, respectfully, this amounts to Hollingsworth identifying several names that highlight the importance of Barrett's qualifications of "most" and "many." At the risk of redundancy, the point to emphasize is that Barrett says, explicitly, "*most*" versions of ST "hold to *some* or all of the eight marks," which provides plenty of space for the figures above to fit the description. It is difficult to see how figures like McCall and Craig, by virtue of their failure to embody all eight marks in the definition of above, demonstrate the inadequacy of Barrett's definition—especially when Barrett's definition *includes* the allowance of an ST that lacks all eight marks—but Hollingsworth seems to think this is the case. This is made apparent in his misguided assumption that "Barrett in essence claims that each of these components is a *necessary condition* for a view of the Trinity to be ST."[11] This is simply not true. Not only does Hollingsworth project implicit intent on Barrett inaccurately, he positively denies that Barrett's definition includes the nuance that Barrett explicitly *does* include. By missing (or possibly even *ignoring*) these qualifications, Hollingsworth seems to imagine that Barrett's whole project rises or falls on every social trinitarian's rigid and exhaustive adherence to all eight marks of his definition (which is manifestly not the case).

Moreover, Hollingsworth fails to pay attention to one of the main contributions of the chapter: although major fathers of social trinitarianism (e.g., Moltmann) are more radical than evangelicals (a qualification Barrett *does* make), evangelicals have been influenced by some of the major tenets of social trinitarianism. Again, if chapter 3 is read in context, Hollingsworth might have noticed how Barrett begins his book with the shocking discovery that evangelicals have been quick to abandon eternal generation. Barrett's point is not that evangelicals have embraced every tenet of social trinitarianism, but they have breathed in the air of social trinitarianism, and serious consequences have followed. In other words, Barrett explains evangelicalism's drift from Nicaea not by appealing to a wholesale adoption of social trinitarianism but to social trinitarianism's *influence* on evangelicalism, however great or small. Barrett is not concerned primarily with whether every individual has succumbed to a point-by-point adoption of social trinitarianism but whether there has been a paradigm shift in any degree.

These misjudgments of Hollingsworth call attention to what is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of his article. Hollingsworth appears to think that Barrett's greatest objection to ST is the way it is *used* (i.e., as a social program for ecclesiology, or politics, or gender relations, etc.). So, he assumes that by citing the example of social trinitarians who do not *use* their ST in these various ways, Barrett's argument falls apart. But Barrett's primary objection to ST is *not* the way it is used; the various inappropriate uses of the Trinity in most forms of ST are only symptoms of its greater erroneous program. *The primary objection to ST is that it runs the risk of tritheism.* Or, to take the argument a step forward, the primary objection to ST is that *it is*

11. Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 205. *Emphasis added.*

non-Nicene. This is where keeping chapter 3 in its larger context is very important. The reader will not fully appreciate the gravity of the "Trinity drift" described in chapter 3 until he reaches chapters five, six, seven, and eight. That's when the *primary* objection to ST—i.e., its dangerous proximity to tritheism—becomes most apparent. Thus, we can grant Hollingsworth's proposal for a *mere* ST—in which we define it simply as positing three distinct centers of will and consciousness in the godhead—and *Simply Trinity's* main criticisms against it still stand. In this way, Hollingsworth does not accomplish what he sets out to accomplish in his critique. What makes ST so repugnant to Barrett is not that it is political, but rather that it is a clear departure from the trinitarianism of Nicaea.

Such a significant misjudgment on Hollingsworth's part explains his neglect of one of Barrett's primary concerns across the book; indeed, it is in the title itself: the recovery of the Trinity's *simplicity* over against three centers of consciousness and will. Hollingsworth does not seem aware of the importance of Barrett's repeated warning against *conflation* between the immanent and economic Trinity, a warning embodied by Barrett's repeated concern that simplicity has been forfeited and substituted for a social unity that looks more human than divine. Furthermore, when Hollingsworth misses Barrett's main criticism—namely, social trinitarianism risks tritheism and drifts from Nicene trinitarianism—Hollingsworth also overlooks not only Barrett's primary point but Barrett's alignment with other Nicene historians and theologians today who make the same argument, such as Keith Johnson, Lewis Ayres, Matthew Levering, Stephen Holmes, among many others. Barrett even underlines this primary objection to social trinitarianism when he concludes chapter 3 itself with this sobering quote from Holmes' book *The Quest for the Trinity:* "I see the twentieth-century renewal of Trinitarian theology as depending in large part on concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, medieval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity. In some cases, indeed, they are points explicitly and energetically repudiated as erroneous—even occasionally as formally heretical—by the earlier tradition."[12] For *this* primary reason, Barrett says we are experiencing Trinity drift.[13]

Concluding Thoughts on Interpretation and the Authority of Tradition

Of course, objecting to ST on the grounds that it is non-Nicene brings us back to Hollingsworth's concluding remarks, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

12.   Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity,* 3.

13.   Keith Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

Judging from the concluding section of his paper, we might suspect Hollingsworth to respond at this point by granting that Barrett objects to ST on the grounds that it is non-Nicene, and then citing this as evidence for Barrett's tendency to assume what he ought to prove. Who says our doctrine of the Trinity should be Nicene to begin with? How do we know the fathers were right in their handling of the biblical text? Are we minimizing our commitment to *sola scriptura* by privileging the Nicene tradition in its exegesis? There are a couple of things we can say by way of response.

To begin, we should remember that Protestant theologians, going all the way back to the Reformation itself, have insisted on privileging the early ecumenical creeds and councils regarding Trinitarianism, Theology Proper, and Christology precisely *because* those codified statements are, in their estimation, faithful to the Scriptures. In other words, the Nicene Creed has historically been understood by Protestants to be authoritative by derivation; it derives its authority from the Scriptures. The claim that Barrett and others in this "classical camp" make is that the pro-Nicene Fathers' trinitarianism should be adopted for no other reason than that their trinitarianism is *biblical*. Their exegesis still holds up: that is the claim. On this note, we should make the simple observation that Barrett, in *Simply Trinity, does* in fact provide biblical and exegetical reasons for assuming that the Nicene Creed should be regarded as a faithful articulation of the Scriptures—particularly in chapters 4-10 which Hollingsworth leaves out of his analysis. Indeed, the exegesis of all those chapters is preceded by the title, "How do we find our way home?", a title that says to the reader, "Barrett is now going to explain why Nicene trinitarianism *is* biblical." In this way, Barrett implicitly argues for the exegetical inferiority of ST's approach to the Scriptures by setting on display the exegetical superiority of the tradition's handling of the Scriptures.[14]

14. Granted, these arguments are not intended to take academic form, but that takes us back to the earlier observation about the nature of *Simply Trinity.* For more scholarly takes that argue in harmony with Barrett, see: D. Glenn Butner Jr., *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018); Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: 2021); Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (eds.) *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), particularly Scott R. Swain's chapter, "The Radiance of the Father's Glory: Eternal Generation, the Divine Names, and Biblical Interpretation," Matthew Y. Emerson's chapter, "The Role of Proverbs 8: Eternal Generation and Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern," Madison N. Pierce's chapter, "Hebrews 1 and the Son Begotten 'Today'"; and Michael F. Bird and Scott Harrower (eds.), *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal Academic, 2019), particularly Madison N. Pierce's chapter, "Trinity without Taxis? A Reconsideration of 1 Corinthians 11," Amy Peeler's chapter, "What Does 'Father' Mean? Trinity without Tiers in the Epistle to the Hebrews," and Ian Paul's chapter, "The Trinitarian Dynamic in the Book of Revelation." Additional support can be found in the following recent volumes: D. Glenn Butner Jr., *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Conception of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022) and R.B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

Regarding the relative authority of the tradition, Hollingsworth is right to explain how chapter 2 of *Simply Trinity* "is dedicated to re-telling the Arian and Eunomian controversies and how the orthodox doctrine of God was defended, reaffirmed, and triumphant over the heresies of Arius and other dissenters."[15] Surprisingly, however, Hollingsworth goes on to object that "Barrett never really discusses or argues for *why* the tradition, its hermeneutic, and its trinitarian conclusions are on solid ground; he merely asserts and assumes that this just is the case."[16] In one sense, this is very true. Barrett does seem to presuppose that the exegesis that successfully defended the orthodox doctrine of God against the Arian and Eunomian heresies does not need elaborate justification. But this is because Barrett assumes an evangelical readership will consider "the orthodox doctrine of God" a desirable enough outcome. If providing a successful defense of the Trinity against Arian and Eunomian attacks does not qualify the Nicene fathers' theological and hermeneutical method as standing on "solid ground," what would? It is technically true that Barrett presupposes the sufficiency of such an appeal for lay-evangelicals who ostensibly desire to be historically orthodox, without arguing *why* evangelicals should desire to be historically orthodox, but I would think that such a presupposition is a fair one.

Furthermore, Hollingsworth once again fails to read a chapter in the context of the *entire* book; chapters 4-10 of *Simply Trinity* do not move past Nicaea but demonstrate the legitimacy of Nicaea's claims. To say, as Hollingsworth does, that chapter 2 merely asserts but does not evidence Nicene trinitarianism is strange, even shortsighted, especially since the rest of the book exemplifies Nicaea's exegetical, theological, and philosophical logic. In chapter 2, for example, Barrett asserts the patristic affirmation of simplicity in the patristic attempt to explain the Son's equality to the Father, only for Barrett to dedicate all of chapter 5 to a defense of simplicity's biblical and theological credibility. Barrett does the same with eternal generation, eternal spiration, and inseparable operations. In fact, eternal generation receives two whole chapters, one of which is entirely devoted to the doctrine's *biblical* warrant (chapter 7). In doing so, Barrett fulfills his promise at the start of the book when he says evangelicals have been dismissive of eternal generation and his book will display a "mosaic" of biblical imagery to recover the doctrine. Hollingsworth's claim that Barrett has "cheated" by merely asserting Nicaea's beliefs is baffling considering the next two hundred pages of *Simply Trinity* are devoted to demonstrating Nicaea's coherence.

This all raises another question. Does Hollingsworth *not* think that the historical conception of the Trinity is correct? Many social trinitarians, particularly of the

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15. Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 207.
16. Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 207.

evangelical variety, insist on rejecting Nicene hermeneutics whilst maintaining a Nicene articulation of the Trinity. *We all wish to confess the Nicene and historic Trinity; we simply differ on how to define, articulate, and defend the doctrine*—this is how the argument typically goes. However, Hollingsworth seems to wonder if either (i.e., Nicene hermeneutics *or* Nicene trinitarianism) are necessary or desirable. If this is the case, Hollingsworth deserves commendation for his honesty and consistency, but the question nevertheless remains: if it is not the historic doctrine of the Trinity Hollingsworth is after, how can the conception he *does* want be considered *Christian* in any historically meaningful sense? If such a Trinity *is* a departure from what Christians throughout history have meant by the word, "Trinity," how would such a conception not constitute as a radical redefinition? Note, I am *not* necessarily charging Hollingsworth with departing from the Christian tradition or subscribing to a sub-Christian definition of the Trinity, (he does, after all, pose these challenges in the form of *questions,* and I do not wish to read too much into them); I am merely raising a question of definition. What does the word "Trinity" mean if our definition is not resourced by history? While Hollingsworth wonders why the tradition should be privileged in its hermeneutic and its fruit (i.e., *Nicene* trinitarianism), I am wondering what the alternative is, save a trinitarianism that redefines the term altogether.[17]

In light of his article, we might expect Hollingsworth to retort that the alternative may simply be a more biblically faithful conception; a conception that takes *sola scriptura* more seriously. Hollingsworth seems to imply nothing less when he suggests that Barrett's embrace of the tradition as a hermeneutical authority undermines "some of the pragmatics of *sola scriptura*."[18] Of course, such an undermining act would refer to the Reformers themselves. To be clear, if Barrett's appropriation of the tradition as a subordinate—though hermeneutically consequential—authority under the Scriptures undermines the pragmatics of *sola scriptura*, the very historic architects and articulators of *sola scriptura* undermined the doctrine they defended.[19] This would mean that either they did not think their own doctrinal convictions through, or that Hollingsworth (along with R. T. Mullins, whom he cites on this

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17.   Stephen Holmes has argued similarly that the definition of "Trinity" is nothing if not a historical exploration: "I might attempt to prove that the doctrine of unconditional election is false from the Scriptures, but I cannot prove that it is not a proper tenet of Calvinism by exegesis [because that is a historical question, not an exegetical one]. In exactly the same way, I can try to prove that a position, be it EFS, or confession of the *filioque,* or inseparable operations, or divine simplicity, is right by appeal to Scripture, but I cannot necessarily, prove that a position is trinitarian by the same procedure. *That judgement can only ever be arrived at historically.*" Stephen R. Holmes, "Classical Trinitarianism and Eternal Functional Subordination: Some Historical and Dogmatic Reflections," in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 95–96 (emphasis mine). I am grateful to Jacob Rainwater for calling my attention to this article.

18.   Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 208.

19.   This point is even made by Barrett himself in his book, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); Barrett is clearly in support of *sola scriptura* but warns against *solo scriptura.*

point) misunderstands *sola scriptura,* loading it with "pragmatic" consequences that are alien to its essence. The Reformers did not resolve the tension between *sola scriptura* and their privileging of the Creeds not because they were blind to the problem, but because there was, in fact, no tension to begin with. Additionally, one can argue that the existence and relative authority of creeds and confessions does not undermine a doctrine of *sola scriptura* in the slightest because the creation of creeds and confessions—which function as guardrails to protect the deposit of the faith once for all delivered to the saints—has a biblical rationale.[20]

The foregoing calls our attention, finally, to the question of where the burden of proof lies regarding hermeneutics and the tradition's role therein. While it is easy to opine about the authority of Scripture in the abstract, at some point, we have to adopt some kind of hermeneutical grid. Barrett insists that the best hermeneutical grid—and the one that yields historically orthodox trinitarian doctrine—is the same one the Nicene Fathers used.[21] This, we would argue, is the proper use of the *rule of faith*.[22] Historically, the *rule of faith* has been the general stress-test used to determine the orthodoxy of a doctrine. Of course, we are talking in generalities here, and the edges are not razor sharp. How much do I need to agree with Athanasius's exegesis on every biblical doctrine to be considered orthodox? There are degrees to this principle, but the fact of degree alone does not annihilate the coherence of this notion we might refer to as *historical precedent*. The fact is, if we do not take something like *the rule of faith* or "the Great Tradition" into account when judging the validity of a theological method or biblical interpretation, we must adopt something else. A naked appeal to Scripture will not do, because it is the legitimacy of Scriptural interpretation that is in question (after all, Athanasius and Arius cited the same proof-texts). What, then, is left but the judgment of individuals?

There is a kind of affirmation of biblical authority that, in the name of freeing the Scriptures from the tyrannical authority of a tradition, subjects the Scriptures to the no-less tyrannical authority of the *individual*. To be clear, I am not here accusing Hollingsworth of committing the grave and hubris subjugation of the Scriptures to his individual whims. I merely bring this point up to ask: if one chooses to reject the

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20. J. V. Fesko argues this very point in *The Need for Creeds Today: Confessional Faith in a Faithless Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

21. Craig A Carter argues this point in *Interpreting the Scriptures with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

22. For more on the "rule of faith" and its harmony with *sola scriptura,* see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 49–116; Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011); Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1530–1725,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Ian Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture,* (Waco: Baylor, 2017); Paul Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," *Trinity Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2007); Richard Muller, *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

relative authority of the tradition with the use of the "rule of faith," what is to keep one from becoming a judge unto oneself? To whom *are* his orthodox *bona fides* held accountable if not to the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church?" According to Hollingsworth, "traditionalists need to demonstrate why, for example, the tradition should be considered as more authoritative than reason and argumentation."[23] But "traditionalists" (as Hollingsworth calls them) need to do nothing of the kind. To frame the matter this way is to pose a false choice. Traditionalists insist that the tradition is reasonable and stands up to argumentation. Its authority persists precisely *because* of its reasonableness and faithfulness to the Scriptures. Hollingsworth imagines Barrett merely appeals to the tradition as if it were authoritative over and against the real work of biblical exegesis, reasoning, and argumentation. But could not the re-presentation of the tradition's solid exegesis, reasoning, and argumentation merely *look* to Hollingsworth like an a-critical appeal to tradition, when it is actually simply a hearty agreement with the tradition? What if the exegesis of the tradition still holds up? What if Barrett does not merely repeat the arguments of the tradition because he treats their word as more authoritative than the Scriptures, but rather because those arguments were faithful to the Scriptures and simply have not yet been beaten?[24]

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23. Hollingsworth, "On Critiquing Social Trinitarianism," 212.