

## **Comparing And Contrasting the Perspective of Feinberg and Barrett on The Trinity**

The doctrine of the Trinity is the focus of the Christian confession, and at the same time, it has been one of the most disputed doctrines among present-day evangelistic theologians. Still more recent debates, particularly of the eternity of the Son (ESS) and of the nature of the divine relationships, have necessitated the demand that we be precise in the statement of what we obtain in Scripture and tradition respecting the Christian relations with God. Matthew Barrett and John Feinberg are two theologians who have made significant contributions to this debate. Although they both claim the historical confession according to which God is one person in three persons, they have different perspectives, and their methods, priorities, and the tools of thought with which they explain the teaching are very different.<sup>1</sup> A glance at their perceptions, especially when the analysis is provided by Feinberg and the reconsideration of classical theology is made by Barrett, indicates both areas of no difference and areas of disagreement, besides the necessity of appreciating the Trinity in its simplest form possible, which directs the church to its path and goal.<sup>2</sup>

John Feinberg has made the most important contribution based on his attempt to rephrase classical theism in such a way that it would be acceptable to contemporary philosophical problems. His effort to preserve what he refers to as a modified classical theism in *No One Like Him* stems from contemporary criticisms, which require him to preserve the unity, simplicity, and permanence of God.<sup>3</sup> Feinberg knows that the majority of the evangelicals remain at the crossroad between metaphysics and categories, and that is why he tries to reformulate the

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*, ed. Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019), 148.

<sup>2</sup> John S Feinberg, *No One like Him* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2006), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 106.

doctrine of the Trinity in an analytical form of coherence.<sup>4</sup> And then, he spends a long time answering how the uniqueness of the divine essence can be present in three persons without implying inconsistency and how the distinctions between the divine persons do not divide the essence, and also produces modalism. This is intended to demonstrate that he starts with the clarity of the doctrines and their logic. Also, there is the fact that Feinberg was even-handed in addressing the contemporary ESS debate.<sup>5</sup> Though he acknowledges that Scripture states that the Son must have submitted to the Father in His earthly ministry, he says it was a constituent of the economy of salvation and not of the eternal life of the Godhead.<sup>6</sup> The assumption of the character of the incarnated Son to Feinberg is the statement of John 5:19 and Philippians 2:6-8, when Jesus stated that He must submit Himself to men or suffer under men, instead of suggesting that He will forever remain subordinate in the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> Such differentiation of the economic and immanent Trinity allows him to maintain the full equality of the persons of the divinity and the fact of diverse roles played by them in the redemption.

Matthew Barrett has another approach to the Trinity doctrine. His works may be regarded as a deliberate rediscovery of ancient Christian orthodoxy, and the two books *None Greater* and *Simply Trinity* are an effort to revive classical theism and the Nicene Trinitarianism to the modern evangelical audience. In *None Greater*, Barrett claims that most of the modern-day Christians have unintentionally stored away classical teachings of divinity, in the name of advances and progress, which are: divinity is simple, unchanging, immutable, and eternal, to give

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>5</sup> John S Feinberg, *No One like Him* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2006), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God : The Doctrine of God* (London: Scm Press, 2005), 113.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 54.

way to a more relational or changeable God.<sup>8</sup> Such amendments, as pointed out by Barrett, bring havoc to the Trinitarian theology since the weakening of the doctrine of God leads to confusion on the connection between the divine persons to each other. Suppose that God is not so simple and the Father, Son, and Spirit might begin revealing themselves as three centers of consciousness. It is based on this that the Trinity is established in a theological view of the book that inspired that being of God was undivided, perfect, and one.<sup>9</sup>

According to this perspective, *Simply Trinity* is the face-to-face conflict of Barrett with evangelical Trinitarian fallacies. They are eternal generation, eternal procession, and indivisible operations, according to him, are the most prominent words of the Christian confession, which could be found in the tradition of pro-Nicene.<sup>10</sup> The only things that make a difference between the persons, true biblically and historically to Barrett, are the eternal begetting of the Father of the Son, and the eternal procession of the Spirit. He fights that ESS, assigning immortal authority and submissiveness to the inward life of the Godhead, provokes the simplicity and equality of Divinity.<sup>11</sup> A fourth argument by Barrett against social trinitarianism is that the method has the danger of succumbing to tritheism because of its propensity to explain the persons as three distinct individuals. His restoration of classical tradition is therefore positive and remedial as it compels the evangelicals to reclaim the grammar of creed, which has been used to guide the church in the past and to keep it loyal to Scripture.

Both theologians are firm believers in the Scripture, yet they have a difference in their ways. The prime approach is Feinberg, which is analytic and exegetical. He makes an allusion to

---

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*, ed. Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2021), 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God : The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 82.

Bible facts in unity with God, such as chapter 6, verses 4 and Isaiah 45, and individual distinctions such as John 1:1 and Matthew 3:16- 17.<sup>12</sup> His application of the passages on subjection brings out the relationship between obedience and incarnation, as compared to the eternal role in the Godhead: that Jesus desires to harmonize the Scripture, and not to inject contemporary speculations on the repercussions of the sacred nature. The method by Barrett, however, is canonical and historical.<sup>13</sup> His approach to Scripture is via the tradition of the Nicene tradition and claims that the creeds of the church were actually developed because they were the best in representing a scriptural witness. He uses quotations such as John 1:14, 18, and also John 5:26 to argue that the Son and the Spirit do the work of eternal generations, and also uses such quotations as 1:1-7 and John 14-17 to suggest that the work of the Son and the Spirit makes known their eternal relationships without implying superiority of power.<sup>14</sup> To Barrett, the defense of Scripture means the reconstruction of the categories within which the early church read the Scripture.

A proper understanding of the Trinity has a major impact on theology and church life. Theologically, it assists in safeguarding the church against falsehood, which distorts the Christian religion. The orthodoxy of the Nicene theism and classical theism, followed by Barrett, helps to avoid subordinationism, tritheism, and modalism as well as the philosophical clarity of Feinberg helps the believers express their faith in an intellectual way in reaction to the contemporary challenges.<sup>15</sup> There is also a very strong Trinitarian doctrine that supplements the Christian worship. The church supplicates the Father, by the Son, by the Spirit, and obtaining an idea of

---

<sup>12</sup> John S Feinberg, *No One like Him* (Wheaton. Ill: Crossway, 2006), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2021), 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2021), 131.

unity in the divine activities fortifies the worshipping and the praying. In practicality, the relational concept of the Trinity is being employed with the view of enlightening the Christian community not through simplistic analogy, but through reminding Christian believers that love, unity, and self-giving is rooted in the very life of God. Finally, there is the mission of the Trinity: the Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit, and the Spirit helps the church to have a witness. Identification of such a tri-partite pattern is finding the identity and objectivity of the church.

Finally, Feinberg and Barrett provide rather strong but different opinions. Feinberg brings philosophical consistency and close differentiation between the economic and immanent Trinity, whereas Barrett offers plenty of retrieval of the classical theological doctrines that have made Christianity their former objects. Both are faithful to Scripture, and both of them depict that the Trinity is not a pathetic conjecture but the beating heart of Christian faith, worship, and mission.

## Bibliography

- Barrett, Matthew. *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*. Edited by Fred Sanders. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019.
- Barrett, Matthew. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2021.
- Feinberg, John S. *No One like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God : The Doctrine of God*. London: SCM Press, 2005.