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Patrick Navas. *Divine Truth or Human Tradition? A Reconsideration of the Roman Catholic–Protestant Doctrine of the Trinity in Light of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.*

Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2006

Reviewed by Gary P. Gillum

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (382–451) and one of the leaders of Assyrian Christianity, responded to the Western church and its discussions about the Trinity and subsequent creeds with the following: “The Word of God became flesh, so that in him humanity might be transformed into divinity and the nature of humanity renewed.”<sup>1</sup> For Nestorius and the Nestorian Church, God was clearly not a separate species, but a true Father in Heaven that man could eventually become like, as children of any father are wont to do. Rome’s insistence on a non-scriptural Trinitarian God was so antithetical to what the church in Constantinople subscribed that a Great Schism between East and West eventually occurred in the eleventh century.<sup>2</sup>

Centuries later, Joseph Smith clarified the nature of the Godhead when he had his vision of the Father and the Son, explaining that nature more fully in the King Follett Discourse of April 1844. Much later, in a conference address given October 6, 2007, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles powerfully and unequivocally reiterated the stand that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has taken with regard to the Godhead and the Trinitarian doctrine espoused by Western Christianity. Among other things, he declared that “it is self-evident from the scriptures that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are separate persons, three divine beings.” Further,

we believe these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption. I think it is accurate to say we believe They are one in every significant and eternal aspect imaginable *except* believing Them to be three persons combined in one substance, a Trinitarian notion never set forth in the scriptures because it is not true.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the intervening centuries have seen many challenges to the Trinitarian doctrine from the seventeenth-century Socinians, Unitarians, and others during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both Latter-day Saint and otherwise. However, the most recent and significant of these attempts to challenge the doctrine comes from graduate student Patrick Navas in his monumental *Divine Truth or Human Tradition? A Reconsideration of the Roman Catholic–Protestant Doctrine of the Trinity in Light of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures*. This is a volume to be reckoned with by anyone with Trinitarian beliefs. The subject is thoroughly explored in 560 pages with a profuse amount of footnotes. An “amateur” who speaks with the authority of one who has a doctorate in theology, Navas has erred only in giving the reader more than enough information on the topic—and in not providing a bibliography or subject and scripture indexes. It is a tome worthy of a second edition with wider distribution and a bibliography and indexes added.

Many of his points align with those of Elder Holland—an Apostle most likely unknown to Navas, but with whom he would empathize. Here are some of Navas’s more interesting points:

The doctrine of the Trinity . . . is a doctrine of *inference*, a theological *formulation* based on a certain *interpretation* of Scripture—the result of a certain attempt to synthesize scriptural information (perceived in a certain way), not a direct scriptural teaching or explanation. (74–75)

[There are many truths] that as Christians we can have absolute confidence in based on the clarity and consistency in which they are presented to us in the Bible. When we consider a matter like the Trinity (and other post-biblical doctrinal developments<sup>4</sup>), how can we entertain the same confidence? (76)

Navas then quotes James R. White from *The King James Only Controversy*:

There is nothing wrong with tradition, as long as we do not confuse tradition with truth. As soon as we become more attached to our traditions than we are to truth, we are in very deep trouble. . . . As soon as we make our tradition the test of someone else’s standing with God, we have elevated that tradition to a status that is unbiblical.<sup>5</sup>

Wayne Grudem, author of *Systematic Theology*, makes an interesting statement that is unusual for a theologian: “Where Scripture is silent, it is unwise for us to make definitive pronouncements.”<sup>6</sup> And: “The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his redemptive work that is not found in Scripture.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, it disturbs this reviewer that for many centuries the test of a Christian's "real" faith is whether he believes in the various creeds of Christianity—and hence the definition of a Christian—which excludes members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who have no creed.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is instructive to note that a study of the liturgical year of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches shows many "Sundays after Trinity," which are celebrated throughout the calendar year, so pervasive has the doctrine of the Trinity become in Western Christianity. President Thomas S. Monson, in his October 6, 2007, conference talk mentioned an oft-quoted phrase that "the door of history turns on small hinges, and so do people's lives."<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that the small hinge of Nestorian teachings did not become as important as the slightly larger hinges of various councils during the fourth through twelfth centuries. Much of our subsequent Western culture has been built on their philosophy, albeit mingled with scripture.

One of Joseph Smith's chief contributions to society was the restoration of continuing revelation and the eschewing of any kind of systematic theology—which is how the fourth-century Christian theologians were able to devise such a doctrine as the Trinity. Primal peoples are more in tune with the principle of revelation than so-called civilization. Frithjof Schuon, a writer who has spent a lifetime attempting to discover the proto-religion that is behind all religions, provides an interesting perspective:

The red man has no intention of fixing himself on this earth where everything, according to the law of stabilization and also of condensation (petrification, one might say) is liable to crystallize; and this explains the Indian's aversion for houses, especially stone ones, and also the absence of a writing which, from this perspective, would fix and kill the sacred flow of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Frankly, if any Christian body should believe in the "traditional" doctrine of the Trinity, it should be The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for the Book of Mormon passages in 3 Nephi 11:27 and 2 Nephi 31:20–21 come closer than any passages in the New Testament or Hebrew Scriptures in proclaiming such a creed:

And after this manner shall ye baptize in my name; for behold, verily I say unto you, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one.

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal

life. And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end. Amen.<sup>11</sup>

After all the debates are over, however, it is well to remember one incontrovertible historical and nondenominational fact. In the words of Elder Holland, “If one says we are not Christians because we do not hold a fourth- or fifth-century view of the Godhead, then what of those first Christian Saints, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the living Christ, who did not hold such a view either?”<sup>12</sup>

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1. Nestorius, *Le Livre d'Héraclide de Damas* (1910), quoted in Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), 1.

2. Specifically regarding the doctrine of *filioque*.

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent,” *Ensign* 37 (November 2007): 40–41, emphasis in original.

4. During my seven years of training for the Protestant ministry, many of these other so-called traditional doctrines made me waver in—and eventually discard—the “faith of my fathers”: original sin, a black-and-white choice of heaven or hell, infant baptism, paid ministry, *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), and the inerrancy of scripture. In addition, some time after my conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my father, still a Protestant, told me that he had never believed in the Trinity as a doctrine: his church of choice always depended upon the minister of a given congregation. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity has a rich tradition and has been believed by many sincere and brilliant men and women through the ages.

5. James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995), 17; as quoted in Navas, 84.

6. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 500; as quoted in Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition?* 93.

7. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 131; as quoted in Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition?* 93.

8. See my articles “Christology” and “Creeds” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:272–73, 1:343. Also available online at <http://www.lib.byu.edu/Macmillan>.

9. Thomas S. Monson, “A Royal Priesthood,” *Ensign* 37 (November 2007): 59. Another quote by Philip Sherrard is not so charitable: “We must . . . remember man’s

seemingly inexhaustible capacity for being taken in by a lie, and so for turning his life into a kind of illusion.” “Modern Science and the Dehumanization of Man,” in *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Martin Lings and Clinton Minnaar (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2007), 90.

10. Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 1990), 67.

11. A reasonable interpretation of *God* in the last sentence is *Godhead*.

12. Holland, “The Only True God,” 41.