

Already in its second edition after just over a year in print, *Discovering Biblical Equality* is a welcome, if overdue contribution to the evangelical debate on women. So clearly recognized as the counterpart to Piper and Grudem, amazon.com sells the two books together at a discount, indicating that in the midst of all the published works out there, these two books truly frame the debate. If you have *RMBW* on your shelf, you need to make space for this one as well.

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***Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity:
in Dialogue With Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology***

By Paul D. Molnar. New York: T & T Clark, 2005. 357 pp. \$39.95 paper.

Paul D. Molnar's important book on the Trinity is probably best understood as a voice of dissent against the prevailing tendency of late twentieth century trinitarian theology. The most influential Trinity books from the decades just past were concerned to emphasize the intimate involvement of the triune God in the world. That concern for intimacy was certainly understandable in itself, and also as a reaction to the widely-bemoaned position of irrelevance and abstractness into which the doctrine had lapsed. The doctrine had gone sickly, and re-engagement with the course of human events was the prescription from many doctors: Rahner said in 1967 that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa"; Moltmann in 1980 linked God's triunity with his suffering and the coming of the kingdom, taking his first steps toward a trinitarian panentheism; Jenson in 1982 went beyond identifying God by his saving acts, to locating *The Triune Identity* altogether in those actions; Pannenberg in 1988 described God's "self-actualization in history" as awaiting fulfillment in the eschaton; LaCugna in 1991 taught that "the doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about 'God' but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other"; and Peters in 1993 worried that "*a Deus in se* about which we cannot speak . . . an eternal God beyond the one we have experienced in the economy of salvation . . . only hypostatizes a figment of the philosophical imagination that takes our attention away from the God who was present in Jesus and continues to be present in the Spirit."

Molnar, professor of systematic theology at St. John's University in New York, was monitoring all of these developments closely. In a series of densely-argued articles, and ultimately in this comprehensive monograph (which gathers many of those articles), Molnar explored, documented, and refuted the trend toward what can only be described as reductively economic Trinitarianism. Molnar has no interest in distracting theological attention away from the economy of salvation where God meets us, but he believes that economy can only keep its gracious character

if it is recognized as the economy of a God who is in himself, immanently, triune. After all, the economic Trinity can't be the immanent Trinity unless there is an immanent Trinity for the economic Trinity to be. Thus Molnar's major point is that "the purpose of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity is to recognize, uphold and respect God's freedom" (p. ix). If we are to confess God's freedom, that confession must begin by realizing that he eternally exists, within the fullness of the divine aseity, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

According to Molnar's opening sentence, this is something that "All Christian theologians realize." But then he devotes most of the book to showing in detail how a wide range of contemporary theologians do not in fact realize it, or how they have failed to uphold its implications with systematic consistency. *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* ranges pretty far from the two related doctrinal loci indicated in its title: it includes substantial treatments of the incarnation and the resurrection, explores the doctrines of revelation, creation and grace, and examines relational ontology from several angles. Accordingly, the book finds its widest application not so much as a treatise *De Trinitate*, but as an essay in theological method or, perhaps better, normative dogmatics directed against theologizing from a basis in human experience. Molnar is concerned to show how Christian theology ought to be done, and although the bulk of pages here are given to criticisms, negative judgments, and cautionary tales, these are always in service of that positive vision of a trinitarian theology that confesses God's freedom consistently throughout the system. Molnar's main point is easily enough stated in the title and can be elaborated in a brief essay. What makes this book worthwhile is precisely its systematic range, confidently tracing doctrinal connections not immediately obvious. A competent beginning theologian could have catalogued every deviation from immanent trinitarian orthodoxy in recent decades. Molnar adds to this an acute sensitivity to what might be called the doctrinal ecosystem: how an extinction in one environmental niche has subtle effects throughout the whole system via hidden connections and webs of dependence. When the doctrine of the immanent Trinity goes on the endangered list, the sustainability of Christian theology is compromised.

Molnar's book contends against the ideas of a host of certified important theologians, but he does not seem to think of himself as filing a minority report. He positions his own arguments in the lineage of Thomas F. Torrance, and, more decisively, of Karl Barth, whose theology looms so large in the work that he is deservedly invoked in the subtitle. All roads seem to begin and end with Barth in this book, but that is because Molnar sometimes uses Barth as a useful placeholder for something like "the overall meaning of the biblical witness as responsibly recognized in doctrinal confession." As a work in the field of Barth studies, the book is clear and satisfying, and some of the most interesting sections are the documents of in-house debates among theologians who have been formed by their reading of Barth: see the interactions with Gunton, McCormack, Jüngel, Farrow, and Alan Torrance. Although Molnar's focus is on the twentieth century, part of his confidence comes from standing consciously in the longer trajectory

of Christian thought (signaled chiefly by occasional interventions by Thomas Aquinas, but also Athanasius and Augustine), where the doctrine of the immanent Trinity has held a strategic place. That historic profile contrasts sharply with the trends Molnar documents in contemporary trinitarianism.

Originally released in 2002 as a hardcover, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* has now reappeared in paperback. So the book somehow found its audience, even though its subject is specialized, its interlocutors diverse, and its mode of argumentation unusually demanding. It has been well reviewed in the scholarly journals, especially considering its polemical thrust and its counter-revolutionary stance. My favorite review of the book is Jonathan R. Wilson's notice in *Pro Ecclesia* that, certain disagreements notwithstanding, he found Molnar's central argument convincing and had thus changed his mind about much of what has transpired in trinitarian theology in the past fifty years. It is rare to find a reviewer candid enough to admit that a book has changed his mind on an important issue. But that response is appropriate to the kind of book Molnar has written, which is sustained doctrinal argument at a highly disciplined level. May this paperback edition find more readers and change more minds.

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Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Understanding of Christian Gender

By John G. Stackhouse Jr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. 144 pp. \$14.99 paper.

Can the complementarian and the egalitarian accounts of the Scriptural demarcation of gender identity and roles be reconciled? John Stackhouse Jr. thinks so. Not only can the two kinds of readings be reconciled, but also acknowledged as fair readings of the Scriptures. "Both sides are right" according to Stackhouse (p. 9), *and* not utterly. This is the thrust of the book. In other words, the Scriptures, according to Stackhouse, do affirm what the complementarians claim: domestic and ecclesial leadership of the male sex. And the Scriptures acknowledge Christian feminism: domestic and ecclesial leadership solely by the male sex ought to be abrogated.

Stackhouse's argument turns on what he terms the "doubleness" of the import of the Scriptures: accommodation of some social circumstances for the inception of the gospel and consequent amelioration of those circumstances for the flourishing of the kingdom. Gospel values grow to establish deeply, if not fully, the nature of the kingdom of God. And to His kingdom, Christians ought to be wholly committed. According to Stackhouse, "The Spirit usually conforms himself to the contours he encounters. But as he does so, like an irresistible flow of water, he reshapes them by and by, eventually making the crooked ways straight and the rough places