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Book Review: Retrieving Eternal Generation

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coherent timeline in the mind of the reader as to what events and personalities were interacting with the ideas themselves.

Wright brings the best of history and theology to the forefront as he offers a friendly, but unapologetic voice. He presents the complexities of the period and its players without sounding as if he is recounting the deeds of great heroes. His own epic is one of nuance, compromise, and struggle – a rare, but real-life opportunity to be transported into the minds of seventeenth-century ancestors of the equally complex modern Baptists we know today.

S. Mark Fugitt
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***Retrieving Eternal Generation*. Edited by Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 304pp. \$34.99, Paperback. ISBN 9780310537878.**

In response to the theological conversation that happened online in the summer of 2016 regarding Eternal Functional Subordination, Dr. Stephen Holmes of St. Andrews University said, “It is very hard, probably impossible, to do polemical theology well through the medium of blog posts.”¹ What Holmes was lamenting with this statement was the inability that the blogosphere has to carry nuance and precision in a conversation as meaningful as eternal relations and distinctions of the Godhead. Enter *Retrieving Eternal Generation*.

In *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, editors Fred Sanders and Scott Swain give readers what lacked in much of the online conversation in 2016: nuance, carefulness, and theological charity. Moreover, this work is a demonstration of how interdisciplinary theology should be done with biblical, historical, philosophical, and systematic theology working harmoniously to deliver the reader to a conclusion. In the case of *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, that conclusion is that the doctrine of

¹ Holmes, Stephen. “Eternal Functional Subordination and Inseparable Operations.” Presentation at The Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, 2016.

eternal generation “secures Trinitarian theology against a broad array of disorders, sclerosis, and deflections” (18).

As far as structure, the book has three parts: Biblical Reasoning, Historical Witness, and Contemporary Statements. Each section consists of a collection of contributions by authors that span several denominations and institutions.

In Part One, Biblical Reasoning, each author either introduces a biblical theme and work through a series of pertinent verses, or introduces a particular text and does the exegetical work necessary to deliver the reader to a given conclusion. For the former, see chapters by Swain and Soulen, while Emerson, Gignilliat, Carson, Irons, and Pierce all fit into the latter category.

The second section of the book, Historical Witness, treats individual theologians and eras of theology. In terms of the individual theologians covered, Ayres examines Origen of Alexandria, Johnson works through Augustine, Larsen interacts with Edwards, and finally, Allen concludes the chapter with Barth. Unlike the other contributors in this section, Dixhorn examines an entire era of theology by parsing Trinitarian perspectives of Post-Reformation thinkers.

The third, and final section of the book, Contemporary Statements, consists of three essays that are meant to add to current conversations regarding the doctrine of eternal generation and spans multiple disciplines including philosophy and systematic theology.

There is very little to critique regarding the book by way of content; of course, that depends largely on whether or not the reader agrees with the conclusions drawn in each chapter. It is certainly possible to negatively assess the book for lacking topics that it never set out to address in the first place. However, it is the opinion of this reviewer that the book accomplished what it set out to do. One critique that stands is that of flow.

Like many anthologies, there is an issue of stating the problem. Typically, in constructing a chapter, authors will begin by stating the problem. However, with a collection of essays all from different authors, this becomes either distracting or redundant. At times, *Retrieving Eternal Generation* falls into this error. It could have been more productive to devote a chapter solely to tracing the historical problem of a diminishing doctrine of eternal generation that acted as a unified reference point for the rest of the work.

Moving past this small critique, there is more benefit to this book than a brief review can do justice. Let us begin with the crucial reality that this book is “fair.” The authors are aware of the insufficiencies of their own arguments, as well as each other’s, which they own. For example, Carson critiques Lee Irons’ use of Hebrews 11:17 (89-90), but also does exegetical work to show that there have historically been passages used to defend eternal generation that should not have been (91). Furthermore, Makin admits that his philosophical model of causality is insufficient to make a legitimate case for the aseity of the Son (249).

Second, there is merit in each of the essays in their own right, yet the book is most convincing when viewed in light of its entirety. For example, Emerson cites Kevin Giles’ six reasons to reject eternal generation. The most important of the six is point one, which reads, “[Eternal generation] has no ‘biblical warrant’” (61). Emerson does a fine job demonstrating that readers should doubt this proposition due to Proverbs 8. Yet readers should further doubt the point when Emerson’s exegesis of Proverbs 8 is held together with Carson’s work on John 5, Gignilliat’s case of Micah 5:2, and Pierce’s essay on Hebrews 1.

While this brief review does not do the book justice, it will have to suffice to concisely mention helpful aspects of the book. Readers will benefit from the retrieval of a number of historical arguments for the doctrine of eternal generation, such as Augustine’s assertion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and not the “three brothers” (87), Dixhoorn’s introduction of underplayed theologians (Gataker, Featley, and Cheynell), as well as his captivating storytelling (183-202), the introduction to helpful theological categories that serve as explanation of difficult Trinitarian realities (such as Carson’s “unidirectional obedience”) (96), Emerson’s capable critique of eternal functional subordination and his advocacy for a more mature biblical/systematic hermeneutic (64-65), Sanders’ systematic display of the relationship between soteriology and eternal generation (260), and Makin’s four desiderata for defining eternal generation (247), as well as his three model proposal for philosophically defending the doctrine (248-258). These are but a few beneficial aspects of the work.

While there are sure to be readers who do not find the arguments in this book ultimately convincing, those readers who wish to oppose the arguments presented here should seek to provide answers to at least three questions: (1) What eternally differentiates essence in the Godhead

that does not dissolve into either tri-theism or ontological subordination? (2) What does it mean for Jesus, according to John 5, “to have life in himself” that is simultaneously “granted by the Father”? (3) What are we to make of the divine names that seem to imply familial generation (63)? Moreover, if “Son” is best understood in the economic Trinity only, what are we to make of pre-incarnate uses of the title, such as John 3:17 (86-87)?

In conclusion, *Retrieving Eternal Generation* is a strong biblical, historical, systematic, and philosophical defense of the doctrine of eternal generation. This reviewer recommends this work to any reader seeking an explanation or defense of this underplayed doctrine.

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***Spirituality for the Sent: Casting a New Vision for the Missional Church.* Edited by Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017. 253 pp. \$30.00, Paperback. ISBN 978-0830851577.**

A collection of frequently used words often emerges in written resources and conversations among scholars, pastors, ministry leaders, and Christians alike. For example, it is common to hear the descriptor ‘gospel-centered’ to characterize everything from a church’s budget to its small group curriculum. One also sees this in the ubiquitous uses of the homiletical designation of an ‘expository’ preacher. What does that mean, however, when there are such wide-ranging conceptions of biblical exposition? Certainly, few preachers want whatever label qualifies for the opposite of what one means by ‘expository.’ The title of this volume is arresting because the editors and their immensely qualified contributors seek to grasp two buzzwords saturating the Christian academic circles’ landscape and the broad evangelical church scene. In doing so, Nathan Finn and Keith Whitfield provide a clarifying answer concerning what many consider to be a confusing landscape: What does it mean to be missional, and how does missional Christianity relate to spiritual formation?